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Allegiances

OakClan

Leader- Applestar: Yellow tabby tom with blue eyes and a cream muzzle/paws

Deputy- Spiderstem: Black and brown tom with light green eyes

Medicine cat- Mottlesong: Tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Blackheart: Black tabby tom with yellow eyes

Senior warriors

Russetbriar: Ginger tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Iceleaf: White she-cat with dark green eyes

Apprentice, Scorchpaw

Blizzardflake: White tom with amber eyes

Ivyheart: Silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Flightpaw

Warriors

Tawnywillow: Calico she-cat with indigo eyes

Apprentice, Bluepaw

Toadpad: Black and white tom with yellow eyes

Halfthroat: Gray tom with scarred neck and green eyes

Mistyflake: Gray she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Shimmerpaw

Rosespring: Ginger she-cat with light brown eyes

Frostgaze: Brown tabby she-cat with frosty blue eyes

Apprentice, Redpaw

Bravebranch: Black tom with a white chest and amber eyes

Apprentice, Owlpaw

Gorsewhisper: Blue tabby tom with green eyes

Vixenpool: Red and white she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Primrosepaw

Apprentices

Scorchpaw: Dark ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Flightpaw: Light gray tabby tom with blue eyes

Bluepaw: Blue tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Shimmerpaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes

Redpaw: Ginger and white tom with green eyes

Owlpaw: Brown tabby tom with green eyes

Primrosepaw: Calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Queens

Marigoldscar: Yellow tabby she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Bravebranch's kits: Littlekit, Honeykit, and Aspenkit)

Voletuft: Solid brown she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Gorsewhisper's kits: Nightkit, Songkit, Reedkit, and Dawnkit)

Kits

Littlekit: Black she-cat with green eyes and white paws

Honeykit: Golden brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Aspenkit: White she-cat with blue eyes

Nightkit: Black she-cat with amber eyes

Songkit: Light brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Reedkit: Black and white tom with green eyes

Dawnkit: Cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Elders

Deerstripe: Light gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Cloverleap: Fawn colored calico she-cat with amber eyes

GlacierClan

Leader- Snowstar: White she-cat with green eyes and black hind legs

Deputy- Nightflower: Brown tabby she-cat with dark yellow eyes

Apprentice, Spiritpaw

Medicine cat- Flamehawk: Flame-colored tabby she-cat with green eyes

Senior warriors

Creekfur: Blue tabby tom with amber eyes

Swiftfang: Ginger and white tom with brown eyes
Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Hazelhawk: Golden tabby she-cat wih amber eyes

Lionflight: Light golden tabby tom with green eyes

Warriors

Darkeyes: White she-cat with black ears, paws, muzzle, and tail with indigo eyes

Apprentice, Nutpaw

Otterfire: Brown tom with orange eyes

Stormfern: Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Rowantail: Dark ginger tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Tawnypaw

Daisystep: Cream she-cat with blue eyes

Perchwhisker: Blue tabby she-cat with green eyes

Finchheart: Gray tom with amber eyes

Sparrowsong: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Ashpaw

Ravenwatcher: Dark brown almost black she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentices

Spiritpaw: Black she-cat with indigo eyes

Cedarpaw: Dark gray tom with amber eyes

Nutpaw: Chestnut tom with amber eyes

Tawnypaw: Calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Ashpaw: Gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes

Queens

Petalfire: Calico she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Otterfire's kits: Hickorykit, Foxkit, Rosekit)

Birdfoot: Gray and white she-cat with light blue eyes (Mother to Lionflight's kits: Fawnkit, Pikekit, Sorrelkit, and Flamekit)

Kits

Hickorykit: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Foxkit: Dark calico she-cat with orange eyes

Rosekit: Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Fawnkit: Dark gray and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Pikekit: Gray tabby tom with green eyes

Sorrelkit: 3 gray toned she-cat with amber eyes

Flamekit: Yellow tabby tom with blue eyes

Elders

Troutpool: Blue tabby tom with amber eyes

DawnClan

Leader- Clearstar: Ginger tabby tom with blue eyes and white paws

Apprentice, Sparrowpaw

Deputy- Hollowstream: Dark brown swirled tabby tom with amber eyes

Medicine cat- Tanglewatcher: Gray tom with blue eyes and white paws

Medicine cat apprentice- Timberskip: Brown tom with yellow eyes

Senior warriors

Halfsnow: Golden brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Thorntail: Golden tabby tom with blue eyes

Leopardcoat: Spotted golden tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Shellpaw

Larkflight: Black tom with yellow eyes

Warriors

Poppybee: Pale tabby she-cat with light blue eyes

Echospeck: White and gray spotted she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Fennelpaw

Tumblewatcher: Black and white tom with blue eyes

Birdwatcher: Gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Robinfire: Red tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Sparrowflower: Brown tabby she-cat with white chest, belly, tail,

paws, and chin with blue eyes

Apprentices

Sparrowpaw: Brown she-cat with darker ears, muzzle, paws, and tail tip with amber eyes

Dewpaw: Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Shellpaw: Spotted gray tom with green eyes

Fennelpaw: Sandy colored she-cat with blue eyes

Queens

Stormbird: Dark gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Larkflight's kits: Lichenkit and Whitekit)

Thornbite: Golden brown tabby she-cat with venom green eyes (Mother to Leopardcoat's kits: Goldenkit, Shadekit, and Pebblekit)

Kits

Lichenkit: Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Whitekit: White she-cat with amber eyes

Goldenkit: Leopard pelted tom with green eyes

Shadekit: Dark golden tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Pebblekit: Yellow tabby tom with blue eyes

Elders

Milkstripe: Cream she-cat with yellow eyes

NightClan

Leader- Duststar: Black tom with olive green eyes and white hind legs

Deputy- Blackdust: Black and white speckled tom with brown eyes

Medicine cat- Swiftflake: Black and white spotted tom with blue eyes

Senior warriors

Squirrelsplash: Ginger tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Apprentice, Firepaw

Thistlespirit: Gray and white tom with green eyes

Eeltail: Lithe silver tabby she-cat with indigo eyes and a long tail

Apprentice, Snowpaw

Snakefang: Black tom with long teeth and amber eyes

Warriors

Shredsplash: Blue tabby she-cat with shredded ears and amber eyes

Apprentice, Toadpaw

Maplewhisker: Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Dusthawk: Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Heronstripe: White she-cat with a green left eye and blue right eye

Lionstorm: Golden tabby tom with gray eyes

Apprentices

Firepaw: Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Snowpaw: Black she-cat with white face and blue eyes

Toadpaw: Black tom with yellow eyes

Queens

Otterflower: Brown she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Lionstorm's

kit: Sneezekit)

Brownfoot: Brown she-cat with darker right front paw and blue eyes (Mother to Snakefang's kits: Shellkit and Brokenkit)

Specklewatcher: Black and white spotted she-cat with orange eyes (Expecting Blackheart's kits)

Kits

Sneezekit: Light yellow tabby tom with green eyes

Shellkit: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Brokenkit: Black she-cat wtih blue eyes

Prologue

The night air was peaceful, only a soft gust of wind rustled the leaves on the trees that stood tall like mountains piercing the sky. The quarter moon hung overhead, shining brightly as it watched the land below it.

A group of cats slept in dens that were held up strongly with brambles and leaves for shelter. Soft snoring could be heard, not enough to wake the slumbering cats but loud enough to make ears twitch.

One cat was restless, not sleeping like the rest of his Clanmates. The black tabby tom paced the small space that wasn't occupied by cats glaring at him. His tabby pelt was fluffed up with alarm and his yellow eyes gleamed with worry.

Inside a bigger den than the rest, two she-cats and a tom were inside. The tom was speaking calmly to a black and white spotted she-cat while the other she-cat kept her kits out.

"Calm down, Blackheart." Meowed a silver tabby she-cat. She sat nearby, watching with sympathetic purple eyes. "Specklewatcher will be fine."

Blackheart didn't respond, his nerves too high to process what the she-cat was saying. *Will she be okay? She'll be in so much pain. Swiftflake better be treated her well, Brownfoot too.*

A gray and white tom grunted, clearly unhappy. "She better, I need to give her a piece of my mind once those rascals are born."

"Watch your tongue, Thistlespirit." Scolded the she-cat, glancing at the nursery uneasily. "Kits are a blessing to any Clan, you know that. And Specklewatcher is going to be just fine." She added.

Thistlespirit glared at the she-cat. "Just because she was your apprentice, Eeltail," he growled. "Doesn't mean you can coddle her!"

"I'm not coddling her, Thistlespirit!" Argued Eeltail, her tail lashing from side to side. "I just want her to have an easy birth." She paused, looking at the tom in the eyes. "And you should too."

The warrior let out a hiss and turned away, pelt bristling. "She should be having *my* kits." He spat. "Not some medicine cat's from another Clan."

Blackheart rolled his eyes, making eye contact with Eeltail, his head shaking. "I just hope this goes by quickly so I can go home," he meowed quietly.

Inside the den, a wail came from one of the she-cats and the three cats leaped to their paws. A few murmured words could be heard, but it didn't soothe Blackheart's nerves.

A couple of anxious mews could also be heard, making his eyes widen and he padded quickly towards the den. Eeltail beat him to the entrance and stood in front of him, shaking her head softly.

"Don't go in, Blackheart." She warned, looking over her shoulder. "Swiftflake and Brownfoot need their space to help Specklewatcher."

"But she needs me!" Protested the medicine cat and Eeltail nudged him back, her eyes soft. "Specklewatcher!"

A cry of pain made Blackheart freeze, trembling. Thistlespirit turned around with a sympathetic glint in his eyes now. The black tabby tom sat down and muttered words to himself.

Eeltail flattened her ears as another shriek wracked the night air, demanding for help. The she-cat looked at Thistlespirit, sharing a silent conversation that Blackheart didn't try to decipher.

Panicked mews made Blackheart raise his head from staring at his paws, seeing Swiftflake, the medicine cat, rush out of the nursery and diving into his den. The young tom sprinted out and hurried right back in the nursery.

Blackheart leaped to his paws, racing after the medicine cat. He felt teeth sink into his tail but he pulled free, leaving Eeltail and Thistlespirit to helplessly call his name after him.

In the nursery, Specklewatcher was breathing heavily and blood surrounded her. The white patches of fur were stained red with blood as Swiftflake rushed back and forth, pressing cobwebs on parts that made Blackheart sick.

Brownfoot looked at Blackheart and dipped her head, exiting the den without another word, her kits following her. Blackheart heard the queen speaking to the two cats outside but he didn't know what they were saying.

"I need to stop the bleeding!" Meowed Swiftflake as his eyes got increasingly troubled and worried for the pregnant she-cat bleeding to death in front of him.

"Swiftflake," Blackheart's voice cracked with sadness and anxiety. "Will she-she be okay?"

The tom didn't answer but his eyes said enough. The black tabby tom looked at his mate, tears forming in his yellow eyes as his mate's breathing got slower and weaker.

"S-Specklewatcher," he whispered, padding towards the she-cat and laying by her head. "My love, please, open your eyes."

The she-cat groaned, her eyes fluttering open to take in the sight of her crying mate. "B-Blackheart," she murmured.

The tom scooted closer and lifted her head, resting them in his paws. "I'm here, Specklewatcher," he mewed. "I-I'm here." Grief crashed into Blackheart like a wave. He didn't want to lose the only cat that made him truly happy.

"Why don't we n-name the kits?" Rasped the she-cat, turning her attention to the three bundles lying at her belly. Two of them weren't moving, the third barely clinging to life.

Blackheart gulped, nodding. He looked at one of the unmoving kits, a spotted white tom. "H-his name will be L-Leopardkit." He meowed shakily.

Specklewatcher nodded weakly and coughed, spitting blood onto her mate's tabby fur. "T-The silver she-kit will be named Silverkit,"

she murmured.

"That sounds perfect," Blackheart mewed, licking Specklewatcher's head to keep her awake. "Why don't you name the last one?"

The she-cat nodded and looked at the final kit, a black she-cat. "N-Nightkit," she meowed finally.

Swiftflake looked at the family, sorrow in his eyes. "Beautiful names," he commented.

Blackheart nodded, looking at his mate. She had closed her eyes and her head moved limply in his paws. "Specklewatcher?" He meowed, panicking.

Swiftflake shook his head, eyes clouded with sympathy. "Blackheart, she's gone." He mewed quietly.

"No!" Blackheart wailed, nudging her over and over. "Specklewatcher!"

Swiftflake exited the den, leaving Blackheart to sob. "Eeltail," he meowed. "Get Maplewhisker and Lionstorm to bury the two kits, Specklewatcher's dead."

Eeltail's eyes widened but did as she was told. She padded away, her tail dragging behind her as she went to go find the two warriors.

"Thistlespirit," the medicine cat meowed. "Get Blackdust and Duststar. They need to get Blackheart home with his daughter."

"What about Specklewatcher's body?" The tom asked hesitantly.

Swiftflake looked over his shoulder, hearing the sobs of Blackheart. "I'll bury her."

The tom nodded and bounded away, leaving Swiftflake alone with his thoughts.

Chapter One

"Why isn't she opening her eyes yet?" Asked a voice that made Nightkit's ear twitch. "She should've by now."

"Calm down, Marigoldscar," scolded another, calmer voice. "She's a few days old, she'll need all the time she wants to open her eyes."

Marigoldscar? Who are these cats? Nightkit wondered, her eyes refusing to open. What did the nursery look like? What about the camp? Was it as big as Honeykit, Littlekit, and Aspenkit said it was?

"I'm only asking because *my* three opened their eyes just a day after they were born." Marigoldscar sniffed, sounding smug. "Littlekit even has *my* eyes!"

"StarClan forbid one of your kits doesn't have your green eyes, Marigoldscar." Mewed the other cat, sounding exasperated. "Nightkit will open her eyes when she feels it's time."

StarClan! Nightkit felt excited, feeling her eyes open at the word. The light in the den blinded her, making her eyes quickly close and slowly open once more.

"Look, Voletuft, she's opened them." Marigoldscar teased. "Guess she thought it was time."

Voletuft scoffed and looked down at Nightkit, who was blinking to get used to the bright den. "Good afternoon, Nightkit." She purred, licking her on the head.

Nightkit gazed up at the she-cat, eyes wide with awe and wonder. *Is she related to me or something?* She thought. *Is that why she's being so nice to me?*

"She's a fine kit, Voletuft." Meowed a warm voice. A large blue tabby tom pushed his way into the nursery, eyes gleaming. "Where are Songkit, Reedkit, and Dawnkit?"

Voletuft looked at Nightkit, who was staring at the huge warrior. *Who does he think he is?* She thought indignantly. *I'll show him not to storm in here!*

On stubby, wobbly legs, Nightkit trotted over to the intruder and shakily swatted at his large paws. "Take that, you intruder!" She squeaked.

Voletuft purred with amusement as the tom crouched down, hissing playfully. Nightkit let out a squeal and launched herself at him, paws outstretched.

She landed on his muzzle, making him grunt softly. Nightkit narrowed her eyes and batted at his face, all the while being watched by Voletuft and Marigoldscar.

The large warrior stood up, taking Nightkit with him. She looked down and wailed at how high she was off the ground. *He's so tall!* She thought, uselessly flailing her hind paws.

"Put me down!" She screeched, eyes screwing shut. "Voletuft! Help me!"

Something grasped her scruff from behind her and Nightkit felt Voletuft lift her off the muzzle of the warrior and gently put her on the ground. Shaken and trembling, Nightkit let out a cry and buried herself in Voletuft's fur, trying to get as far away from the warrior as she possibly could.

Voletuft chuckled, her tail twitching in amusement. "It's okay, Nightkit." She meowed soothingly. "Gorsewhisper was just playing with you."

Nightkit wanted to believe her, but Gorsewhisper was so huge! He could eat her in one bite if he wanted to! Still unsure of how to feel about the large tom, Nightkit pressed herself closer to Voletuft.

"What if I show you around the camp?" Asked the voice of Gorsewhisper, making Nightkit perk up. "Songkit, Reedkit, and Dawnkit have already seen it."

Nightkit fought her way out of her mother's fur and tumbled to the ground, quickly scrambling up to gaze at Gorsewhisper. "Yes, please!" She squeaked.

From her nest, Marigoldscar let out a snort of contempt. "You're only a few days old, you shouldn't be out of the nursery." She meowed crushingly.

Nightkit winced, lowering herself to the ground slightly as Marigoldscar looked at her with distaste. *Why doesn't she like me?*

Voletuft shot her denmate a glare and nudged Nightkit to her paws, eyes gleaming encouragingly. "Don't mind her, Nightkit." She purred. "Marigoldscar has a thorn in her rear end, she always does. Run along, now. I can't wait to hear all about your adventure when you come back."

With a final glance at Marigoldscar and her mother, Nightkit and Gorsewhisper padded out of the den and into the OakClan camp.

Chapter Two

Nightkit followed Gorsewhisper as he headed for a tree with a hole in the trunk, forming a den. As they passed by the den, the warrior began to speak.

"That's the elders' den, Nightkit." He meowed, flicking his tail to the tree. "That's where Cloverleap and Deerstripe sleep, and you'll be there one day if you so choose."

The black she-cat perked her small ears, looking into the den and making out the shapes of both elders sleeping inside. "What do they do to contribute to the Clan?" She asked, looking up at Gorsewhisper.

The tom looked down at the she-cat, eyes glinting. "They tell stories to kits like you, your littermates, and your denmates." He explained. "They used to serve the Clan for seasons and they have our respect as payment."

"Do they have kits?" She mewed, looking back at the nursery. "Are Littlekit, Honeykit, and Aspenkit their kits?"

Gorsewhisper shook his head, looking ahead. "As elders, they can't have kits. Either they're too old or too weak. Besides, if you were an elder, would you want to go through the pain of having kits?"

Nightkit shrugged, not knowing what to say. "Do Cloverleap and Deerstripe have kits that are warriors?" She asked, looking around the camp.

Gorsewhisper was quiet for a moment before answering. "Vixenpool is Cloverleap's daughter," he meowed. "Mistyflake, Halfthroat, and Flightpaw are Deerstripe's kits."

"*Halfthroat*?" Nightkit gasped, eyes wide. "Why is he called that?" She stared at Gorsewhisper, gaping at the tom.

Gorsewhisper looked down at her with shadowed eyes, making her uneasy. "When he was an apprentice, Halfthroat's name was Boulderpaw." He let out a soft chuckle. "He *hated* that name and made sure every cat knew as much."

Nightkit tilted her head, confused. "Why would he hate the name his mother gave him?" She asked. *I like my name, I guess.*

"Because my mother didn't give me the name of Boulderpaw," growled a rough, scathing voice behind them. Nightkit whirled around and yelped at the tom in front of her.

A gray tom with fierce green eyes and a horribly scarred neck made Nightkit sick. His eyes bore into hers, making her very uncomfortable.

"Hello, Halfthroat," meowed Gorsewhisper, padding towards the warrior. "How are you today?"

Halfthroat grunted, looking at the tom. "Fine, I guess." He meowed and looked down at Nightkit. "Who's that?"

"I'm Nightkit," she answered quietly, looking down at her paws. "I'm out of the nursery for the first time." Nightkit refused to look up, despite the thoughts racing in her mind. How did he get the scars on his neck?

"That's good," meowed the gray warrior and looked across the camp. "Well, I'll see you later, Gorsewhisper. Ivyheart wants me to share prey with her." Without another word from the tom, Halfthroat stalked away towards a silver tabby she-cat.

"And that, Nightkit, is Halfthroat." Gorsewhisper meowed after a moment. "Let's continue with the tour, shall we?"

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Nightkit dragged her paws back to the nursery, aching from the

walk all around the camp. *I'm so tired, I could sleep for an entire moon!* She thought.

After the awkward conversation with Halfthroat, Gorsewhisper spoke less during the tour around the camp. Nightkit kept quiet during most of it, only asking questions that she desired to be answered.

"You're back," meowed Voletuft, gazing at her with tired amber eyes. "You look exhausted, come over here." She purred.

Nightkit didn't speak as she curled up with her mother, her eyes closing before she even laid down. She felt her mother's tongue rasping gently against her head as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Three

"Come on, Nightkit! Play with us!" Meowed Reedkit, his green eyes bored. "We're playing moss ball!"

"Yeah, Nightkit!" Sneered Songkit, shoving her to the ground. "Come play with us! Unless you're too scared."

Nightkit looked up at her littermates in fear, why were they acting like this? She had done nothing wrong! "I-I'm not scared!" She retorted, only half lying.

In truth, she was terrified of Songkit and Dawnkit. They always bullied and shoved her around like a mouse. Teasing and sneering was practically plastered on their faces whenever Voletuft wasn't around.

Nightkit didn't know what she did wrong, that is, if she did something wrong in the first place. She was their sister and she had to deal with their constant pestering.

Out of the two of them, Reedkit was the one who was the nicest to Nightkit. Always asking about her day and asking if she wanted to play or go to Cloverleap and Deerstripe for a story.

Nightkit liked the tom, and often played with him when Dawnkit and Songkit weren't around to chastize her about whatever they could.

Reedkit was her friend. Her only friend and Nightkit treasured the small friendship they ignited a moon or so ago.

A moon and a half ago, Russetbriar moved into the nursery expecting Blizzardflake's kits. Nightkit never knew why she would move into the already cramped nursery.

A swat at her ear made Nightkit squeak in pain as claws met the tip

of her ear. A warm and sticky liquid trickled down the tip of her ear and down her cheek. *Blood!*

Songkit was swiping at her, his claws unsheathed. Another blow made her crash to the ground, her cheek bleeding. She looked up at her brother, seeing hatred and cold malice in the amber depths.

"S-stop!" She begged, her ears flattening to her skull as the tom kept swatting at her. Nightkit shut her eyes, shaking with fear as her brother pummeled her with painful blows.

Suddenly, she heard a grunt and the pain stopped being inflicted on her body. Nightkit opened her eyes, seeing Reedkit standing over Songkit, his lips drawing back into a snarl.

"You leave her alone, you mouse-heart!" He hissed. Songkit's claws sheathed, his eyes wide with terror. "When she tells you to stop, you listen!"

Dawnkit let out a hiss, but quieted when Reedkit glared at her. For a moment, all four kittens where quiet. When Nightkit shakily got to her paws, Reedkit was there in an instant.

"Are you okay?" He asked, genuine worry in his mew. She shook her head, pain all over where Songkit rained blow after blow on her. "Come on, I'll help you get to Mottlesong and Blackheart."

As Nightkit was escorted by a very comforting Reedkit, she couldn't help but notice that some cats stared at her. She shrank in her fur, trying to hide herself.

Cats' eyes pierced through her black pelt and Nightkit felt uncomfortable. *At least Reedkit like me, right?* She wondered, glancing at the black and white tom.

"Do you see the blood on her fur?" That comment from one of the warriors made Nightkit stop in her tracks. She scanned the clearing, ignoring the weird glance from Reedkit.

She saw a group of three or four warriors looking at her with narrowed, resentful eyes. They seemed to be talking about her and

that made Nightkit's tail droop.

Pushing past Reedkit, Nightkit sprinted the rest of the way towards Mottlesong and Blackheart's den. She barged right in, startling Blackheart, who was bundling a pile of herbs together.

"StarClan's name, Nightkit!" Blackheart exclaimed. "What happened to you?"

Reedkit spoke before Nightkit could and burst out with anger lacing his mew. "Songkit attacked her!" He hissed, short tail lashing side to side. "I saw it with my own eyes!"

Nightkit flattened herself to the ground, shame washing over her. "I-I'm okay," she murmured.

Reedkit turned to her, his eyes blazing with anger. "No, you aren't!" He argued. "You were shredded by Songkit because he's a bully!"

"Calm down, Reedkit." Blackheart chided. The tom looked at Nightkit, something in his gaze made Nightkit frown. "Come over here, Nightkit, and I'll get the herbs to get you treated."

Nightkit nodded, shuffling herself closer to the medicine cat apprentice as he turned away to look for the herbs he needed. *What will Applestar think? Would he delay my apprenticeship because I couldn't defend myself?* She shuddered, suddenly chilled to the bone. *Will I have to become Blackheart's apprentice if I can't be a warrior?*

Nightkit winced in pain as Blackheart applied herbs to her scratches, focusing on her paws as he did so. Reedkit left the den, returning to the nursery to tell Voletuft what happened.

She won't punish Songkit, she thinks he's so precious. Nightkit thought, disappointed. She caught the medicine cat apprentice's gaze without him noticing.

Was that longing in his eyes? What did he long for? *A mate and kits?* She thought, shifted her gaze away from Blackheart.

"What happened here?" Came the voice of Mottlesong, Blackheart's tortoiseshell mentor. Nightkit spun around, seeing the she-cat trotting towards her.

"Just a little scuffle between Nightkit and Songkit, Mottlesong." Blackheart explained, licking the kit on the head. Nightkit shrank back, his tongue feeling like thorns on her head.

Mottlesong watched as he licked her head, her eyes like a hawk's. A low, barely audible growl rose in her throat and Blackheart looked away quickly.

"You're all patched up, Nightkit." The tom meowed quietly. "Go back to the nursery."

Nightkit didn't need to be told twice. She hurried out of the medicine den, eager to leave. *What* was *Mottlesong so judgemental about when Blackheart treated me?*

Chapter Four

"Dawnkit, hold still!" Scolded Voletuft, licking her daughter with a paw holding her in place. "You need to look your best when you go see the elders!"

"I can clean myself!" Dawnkit argued. "I'm old enough to go to the elders without my mother cleaning me!"

"Deerstripe and Cloverleap will be the judges of that, Dawnkit." Sneered Songkit. "You look like a badger!"

Dawnkit glared at her brother, eyes glinting with annoyance. "And you look like a hedgehog!" She retorted.

Nightkit watched her mother groom her sister, her eyes trained on Voletuft. She had just got cleaned and she was ready to see the elders. Reedkit was standing next to her, watching with narrowed eyes as Songkit stuck out his pink tongue at Dawnkit.

At two moons old, Reedkit held a strong grudge against his brother and sister for hurting Nightkit. The black kit never knew why he would stand up to her, even if he was her supposed friend.

A squeak from Russetbriar's nest made the two kits turn around. A quarter moon ago, Russetbriar's kits had been born. Nightkit and her siblings had been shoved out of the nursery to give the queen, Mottlesong, and Blackheart space.

The senior warrior had quite the litter of kits, despite her being older than Spiderstem, the Clan deputy. Swiftkit was born first, followed by Volekit, named after Voletuft, Pinekit, and Wrenkit.

Apparently, Pinekit was named after the previous deputy, Pinewhisker, who had died when Greencough took over his body. He had died before Nightkit and her siblings were born, but

Nightkit still felt bad for Pinekit.

The apprentices had been named warriors a few days ago. Nightkit and Reedkit got permission from Voletuft to watch while Songkit and Dawnkit were punished for putting thorns in Nightkit's nest.

Scorchpaw had become Scorchtail, much to Nightkit's confusion. *What a strange, unlikely name for the she-cat.* She'd thought. Nightkit had never seen Scorchtail before, probably because she was busy training, patrolling, or hunting for the Clan.

Flightpaw had become Flightclaw, which suited the tom. He was always ready to attack a patrol when they so much as left their scent at the border. Nightkit, of course, never saw outside the camp walls but she believed what the warriors said.

Bluepaw became Blueheart and Nightkit didn't like it. *She doesn't seem to put a ton of heart into what she does for her Clan.* She'd observed in the rare times she saw the she-cat.

Shimmerpaw was now Shimmergaze, Nightkit liked that her name the best. Her light blue eyes gleamed like stars whenever she returned to camp or was looking around.

Redpaw was Redstripe now, Nightkit never knew why he was called that. *He doesn't even have any stripes!* Nonetheless, he'd gotten his warrior name.

Owlpaw got a better name than his siblings, besides Shimmergaze. Owlflight suited the tom very well, as he was jumpy and timid of the cats he didn't know too well.

Finally, Primrosepaw had become Primrosefur. *Because she's so patchy and red.* Nightkit decided that was the reason Applestar gave her a plain name.

Nightkit felt a paw poke her in the side and she let out a squeak of alarm, but relaxed when Reedkit looked at her. "Are we going?" She asked.

The tom nodded eagerly, bouncing up and down. "I can't wait to hear the story about Deerstripe chasing off a dog!"

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Tall Tree for a Clan meeting!" Applestar's voice cut into Nightkit, making her whirl around.

"Are we becoming apprentices?" She asked, suddenly excited. *We are a bit young to become apprentices, though. But Littlekit, Honeykit, and Aspenkit are 3 moons old!*

Speaking of the three kits who were old enough to become apprentices, Marigoldscar, their mother, wasn't present in the nursery. *Strange,* Nightkit thought she'd want to see her kits become apprentices.

"Let's go watch the ceremony!" Chirped Reedkit, bounding towards the nursery entrance. He looked over his shoulder at Nightkit, eyes glinting with mischief. "We can slip between the brambles and keep hidden from the Clan."

Nightkit purred at her brother's slyness to watch a ceremony they would be attending anyway in a moon. *It would be nice to see what we could expect.* She reasoned and charged after Reedkit.

Reedkit looked at Nightkit, a sly smile plastered on his lips and glanced at the brambles a mouse-length away. With a squeak of excitement, he began to squeeze through the gap and shuffle his way into the bramble wall.

Nightkit eyed the brambles warily but shoved her thoughts of being poked by the thorns away and went inside after her brother. The brambles were not at all comfortable and Nightkit winced as some scratched her ears and flanks.

As Reedkit stopped moving and shifted his body so he could watch the Clan meeting, Nightkit did the same, her eyes wide as the entire Clan gathered beneath the Tall Tree.

"There are three kits among us who have reached their third moon and are ready to become apprentices," Applestar announced, looking over at Littlekit, Honeykit, and Aspenkit, who Nightkit and Reedkit couldn't see. "Come forward you three."

Nightkit could see Marigoldscar, their mother, and Bravebranch, their father sat side by side, their eyes gleaming with pride. Nightkit looked at Reedkit, who was intently watching the ceremony.

"Littlekit, from this moment on until you have received your warrior name, you will be known as Littlepaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Rosespring." Applestar nodded to the ginger tabby she-cat. "She is a very caring and talented cat and I know she'll pass on everything she knows to Littlepaw."

Rosespring rose to her paws from where she sat with Toadpad, her eyes shining. She padded towards Littlepaw, bending down and touched noses with her new apprentice.

So Rosespring won't be my mentor. Nightkit thought, watching the new mentor and apprentice sit down with each other. Her tiny tail was sticking to the thorns behind her, making her annoyed.

Applestar went on without hesitation. "Honeykit, from this moment on until you have received your warrior name, you will be known as Honeypaw. Your mentor will be Ivyheart. She is a skilled fighter and a terrific hunter and I know she will pass down those traits on to Honeypaw."

This time, Nightkit couldn't see the silver tabby she-cat as she stood up and touched noses to the new apprentice. Nightkit looked at Reedkit, her eyelid twitching. "Isn't she and Halfthroat mates?" She asked quietly.

Reedkit shrugged his tiny shoulders. "I don't know, I don't keep up with relationships in the Clan." He meowed.

"Aspenkit, from this moment on until you have received your warrior name, you will be known as Aspenpaw. Your mentor will be Gorsewhisper." *Then he'll stay away from us and treat Aspenpaw with more love.* Nightkit thought, jealousy boiling her blood as she thought of her father with an apprentice. "He is a calm and noble warrior and I know he'll train you to be just that."

Gorsewhisper rose to his paws, nodding respectfully to Applestar as he crossed the clearing in a few powerful strides and touched noses with Aspenpaw.

"Littlepaw! Honeypaw! Aspenpaw!" Cheered the Clan, making Nightkit's ears hurt.

"Come on," she whispered to her brother. "Let's go back to the nursery before we get in trouble."

With one final glance at the ceremony, Reedkit nodded to his sister and together they wiggled their way out of the brambles. Nightkit tumbled out first, a few thorns and tendrils sticking to her pelt. She shook her fur, freeing herself of the evidence of her and Reedkits' scheme.

"Let's go inside and play hide-and-seek!" Nightkit squeaked, already bounding inside. She looked over her shoulder, seeing Reedkit following her with happy green eyes.

She didn't have the chance to look back when she slammed into someone, making the two cats toppling over each other. To her dread, she'd slammed right into Songkit.

The light tabby kit let out a yelp and crashed to the ground with Nightkit squishing him to the ground. "Get off me, you tick!" He growled, shoving the black-furred kit off.

Nightkit fell on her back with a gasp, looking fearfully up at Songkit as he towered over her. "I-I'm sorry!" She whimpered, scrambling away.

Songkit let out a hiss and sprang at Nightkit, sending her skidding in the dust. Claws sliced through her pelt and through her thin skin, making her cry out in pain.

Her older brother let out a snarl, slashing her face with his thorn-like claws. "Next time, you won't be so lucky." Songkit threatened and stalked away towards a snickering Dawnkit.

Nightkit watched him go, feeling numb. Tears sprang in her eyes

but she forced them down as she, with Reedkit's help, got to her paws.

"I hate them," her brother spat, making Nightkit flinch at the amount of anger laced his tone. "When we become apprentices next moon, we'll show them not to mess with us!"

Chapter Five

Nightkit opened her eyes, seeing the sun rays streaking the entrance of the nursery. She blinked, trying to get rid of the sleep that fogged her eyes.

Voletuft was still snoring, so Nightkit made sure she didn't wake her mother as she wiggled her way out of the nest. Reedkit was sleeping on his back, snoring loud enough to wake a badger.

Songkit was sleeping on top of Dawnkit, mouth wide open as his snores filled the nursery. Every once in awhile, he'll snort and kick at the air with his hind paws.

Over in Russetbriar's nest, the queen was sleeping peacefully while her kits were scattered around like leaves. Nightkit saw with a bolt of amusement that her kits were sleeping like her siblings.

Swiftkit and Wrenkit were sleeping back to back, Pinekit was sleeping on top of Volekit, and Russetbriar was curled in a ball. Nightkit smiled at the family and turned away, looking at her siblings.

Sighing as Songkit kicked the air again, Nightkit ducked out of the den and peered around the camp. She saw the apprentices, Littlepaw, Honeypaw, and Aspenpaw chatting with a starling between them.

I'll be sharing a den with them any day now! She thought with a wide grin. A moon passed since the ceremony and Nightkit couldn't wait to become an apprentice.

"Someone is up early," meowed a soft voice from behind her and Nightkit spun around, pelt burning as she met the gentle eyes of Voletuft.

"I-I was just thinking of being an apprentice," Nightkit meowed quickly, looking at her paws.

Voletuft purred, sitting down next to her daughter. "It's alright, Nightkit," she meowed. "You'll be one today, you know."

Nightkit nodded, excitement rushing through her once more. "I can't wait!" She squeaked. "I wonder who my mentor will be," Nightkit craned her neck up at peer at her mother, who was smiling.

"You'll know when your littermates wake up and get cleaned," purred the voice of Russetbriar as she stretched her legs. "I wonder how well *that* will go." She added, sending Voletuft a playful look.

Voletuft rolled her eyes and looked down at Nightkit, her eyes gleaming. "I'll wake them now and give them a wash." She paused. "Why don't you tell Applestar I want the Clan to start gathering?"

Nightkit tensed, the thought of speaking to the Clan leader terrified her to the core. Nonetheless, she nodded quickly to her mother and turned to exit the nursery.

Her paws trembled as she stepped into the camp, glancing around to see if cats were staring or speaking about her in hushed whispers.

She scanned the clearing, timidly padding further to the heart of the camp. Nightkit couldn't see Applestar but she could see most of her Clanmates.

Iceleaf was sharing a rather plump squirrel with Tawnywillow as they talked with Flightclaw and Blueheart. Marigoldscar and Bravebranch were basking in the sun with two mice lying with them, untouched.

At the medicine cat den, Mottlesong was lying out herbs to dry in the sun on a rock while Blackheart's shape could be seen checking the stores.

Nightkit looked at the Tall Tree, the tallest tree in the forest. Applestar would call meetings often from the third branch so he could see the entire Clan.

His den was in the trunk, hollowed out by a huge flood that carved out the tree generations before Nightkit was even thought of. Sure

enough, Applestar's yellow tabby pelt appeared in the den as the leader pushed his way into the clearing.

On nervous paws, Nightkit hobbled towards the leader, gulping. What was she going to say? 'My mom wants you to hurry with our apprentice ceremony, you old hag.' Certainly wouldn't please the tom.

Applestar seemed oblivious of the small kit trotting up to him as he began to pad away. Nightkit lowered her ears, following the leader.

Spiderstem, who was speaking with Mistyflake, turned his head as his leader neared. His eyes fell on Nightkit and he smiled. "You have a black follower with you, Applestar." He chuckled, nodding to the she-kit.

The tabby tom looked confused before Nightkit prodded his hind left leg and he peered down at her. "Nightkit," he meowed. "What can I do for you?"

Nightkit forgot how to breathe as her leader addressed her. *Speak, mouse-brain!* She thought and opened her mouth, her voice coming out as a squeak. "V-Voletuft wants our a-apprentice ceremony to start." She mumbled, looking shakily at her leader.

Applestar nodded and looked at the nursery. "Go to your mother and siblings while I call the Clan together, Nightkit." He told her as he began to trot towards the Tall Tree.

Not needing to be told twice, Nightkit bolted back to the nursery, her heart thudding in her chest. *That was scarier than I thought.* She thought as she trembled. *I'm never speaking to Applestar ever again.*

"Just in time, Nightkit." Purred Voletuft as she licked Reedkit on the head. "You look shaken, are you okay?" She asked, worry begining to settle in her tone.

Nightkit nodded, though her throat was tight. "Y-yeah," she stuttered. "I-I'll be okay."

"You better!" Teased Reedkit, bounding over to Nightkit with excited eyes. "I don't want to be an apprentice with you on my

back." He joked, making Nightkit laugh.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Tall Tree for a Clan meeting." Called Applestar from outside the nursery.

Reedkit let out a happy squeak and bounded towards the entrance, only for Voletuft to place her paw on his tail. "You will wait and walk out there like a noble apprentice, not a little kit that misbehaves." She scolded.

"Yes, mom," groaned the tom and he rose to his paws, shaking out his fur.

"Don't worry," meowed Russetbriar from her nest. "You'll be out there in a few moments."

Reedkit narrowed his eyes at the queen, his head tilted. "You'll be watching us, right?" He asked.

"Certainly," she replied, looking at the kit. "I've got nothing better to do."

Nightkit rolled her eyes and looked outside, seeing a bunch of cats gathered at their leader's order. *That's a lot of cats,* she thought with a shudder.

Voletuft nudged Reedkit towards the entrance, her eyes gleaming. "Time to go out, kits." She meowed and looked over her shoulder. "Songkit, Dawnkit, time to go out." She called.

Nightkit froze, forgetting her two other littermates were going to be apprentices with her. *I'll have to share a den with them! I'll never escape the bullying!* Her head wailed.

As they shuffled out of the den, Applestar cast his blue eyes over to the kits, making Nightkit stiffen in fear. Nightkit looked to her right where Reedkit held his head high, his eyes gleaming.

"In naming apprentices, we are showing the other Clans that OakClan grows in numbers and paws." Meowed Applestar from his branch. "Dawnkit, from this moment on until you have earned your

warrior name, you will be known as Dawnpaw." He paused, looking at his warriors. "Vixenpool," meowed the tom. "You will mentor Dawnpaw. I hope Vixenpool will pass down all she knows on to you, Dawnpaw."

The red and white she-cat rose to her paws and nodded, padding towards the newly named apprentice. Nightkit could see Dawnpaw trembling with joy as her new mentor touched noses with her.

Nightkit watched as Dawnpaw and Vixenpool padded back into the crowd and sat down, watching the ceremony. The kit gulped, knowing she will have to deal with whomever Applestar appoints as her mentor.

"Songkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Songpaw." Applestar went on. "Toadpad, you will mentor Songpaw. I hope Toadpad passes on all he knows on to Songpaw."

Songpaw looked disappointed as his black and white mentor padded towards him. He even unsheathed his claws as they both forcefully touched noses.

Nightkit noticed that her brother was tense as they sat down together. *I wouldn't want to be training Songpaw, whether I would be getting an apprentice or not.*

"Reedkit, from this moment on until you have earned you warrior name, you will be known as Reedpaw." The tabby leader meowed. "Tawnywillow, you will mentor Reedpaw. I hope Tawnywillow passes on everything she knows on to Reedpaw."

Reedpaw looked about ready to burst as the calico she-cat neared him. Nightkit couldn't tell if he was excited about his mentor or being an apprentice at last. *It only took three moons.*

"Nightkit," the she-cat jumped as the leader practically spat her name. "From this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Nightpaw." Nightpaw held in her breath, waiting for him to name her mentor. "Halfthroat, you will mentor Nightpaw. I hope Halfthroat passes on everything he knows

on to Nightpaw."

What? She thought, in shock as the scarred tom stalked towards her. *Why do I get Halfthroat?* Not wanting to look rude, Nightpaw leaned up to touch noses with her new mentor, his hot, awful breath wafting up her nose.

As she and Halfthroat sat down, Nightpaw heard every cat cheering the names of her and her siblings. Her name was called the loudest by her mother and father as they sat by Iceleaf.

"Dawnpaw! Songpaw! Reedpaw! Nightpaw!"

Chapter Six

Nightpaw opened her eyes, tiredness from her tour around the territory yesterday still clinging to her limbs. Her paws ached as Halfthroat made her run from the GlacierClan border all the way back to camp as an exercise for her speed.

My paws could fall off and Halfthroat would say I can still run. She thought glumly as she shut her eyes, her tail over her nose as she tried to cling to the sleep that retreated from her body.

After a few moments of trying to go back to sleep but to no avail, Nightpaw sluggishly rose to her paws and stretched. It felt amazing as she stretched out each of her sore muscles and to arch her back with a yawn.

To her right, Littlepaw and Aspenpaw were curled up together while Honeypaw was bundled up in her own nest. *Did something happen to the three of them?* She wondered.

To her left, Reedpaw wasn't in his nest. *Probably on the dawn patrol or going to the dirtplace.* Nightpaw reasoned. Unsurprisingly, Dawnpaw and Songpaw were sleeping next to each other. Songpaw was on his back and leaning against his sister while Dawnpaw slept in a ball.

Nightpaw tore her gaze away from her siblings and denmates and dragged her paws towards the entrance of the apprentice's den. The

light sky made Nightpaw shiver as a chill gripped her bones. *What is it like in Leafbare? What does snow look like?*

She scanned the clearing, trying to pinpoint where her mentor was. Halfthroat wasn't in the camp as far as Nightpaw could tell. Breathing a sigh of relief that she didn't have to be with her terrifying and strict mentor for a little while longer, Nightpaw padded towards the medicine cat den.

The growing sunlight shone on her back, slightly warming Nightpaw as she poked her head inside the den. "Mottlesong?" She called. "Blackheart?"

"Nightpaw?" Came the voice of Mottlesong from the back of the den. "What can I help you with?"

The apprentice shifted her paws, suddenly nervous to speak to the medicine cat. "Is there anything you need me to get?" She asked sheepishly, looking at her paws. "I haven't seen Halfthroat yet and I want to get something done before we start training."

Mottlesong padded towards the she-cat, her amber eyes friendly. "Not at this moment, Nightpaw. Blackheart is collecting some more marigold and horsetail by the Pointed Stones." She meowed. "You can drop by later to see if we need anything, though."

Nightpaw dipped her head, slightly glad she didn't have to collect herbs or pick ticks from the elders. "Okay, Mottlesong. I'll see you later." She meowed, exiting the den.

Outside the nursery, Wrenkit and Swiftkit were chasing leaves that were falling from the trees above them. Nightpaw purred, starting to pad over to the two kits when a sharp, commanding voice stopped her.

"Nightpaw!" Nightpaw gulped, hearing Halfthroat's call. "Get your tail over here this instant!"

Ducking her head in shame, Nightpaw hurried towards her harsh mentor. She sat down, looking at her paws with her ears flattened

to her head as Halfthroat scolded her.

"Don't be too harsh on her, Halfthroat." Meowed a new voice and Nightpaw looked up to see Spiderstem padding over to them. "She's been an apprentice for a day, fresh out of the nursery, remember? You can't expect her to be on time right off the beginning of her apprenticeship."

Halfthroat dipped his head, sending a nasty look at Nightpaw. "Of course, Spiderstem." He meowed, not at all sounding apologetic.

As the deputy turned away, Nightpaw felt a paw hit her ear and she fell to the ground, looking up at Halfthroat with fear in her eyes.

"You make me look bad, you rat," he snarled under his breath. "Come on, you mouse-brained excuse of a cat, we're going training."

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Halfthroat's idea of training was brutal to Nightpaw. Whenever she didn't get a move perfectly the first time, she would be cuffed over the head with a massive paw.

"Again, mouse-heart!" Ordered her mentor, his eyes gleaming with displeasure. "You fight like a newborn kit!"

Nightpaw winced as her mentor hit her again, trying to stifle a squeak of pain. *Maybe I'll get it right this time!* She thought. Crouching down, Nightpaw flung herself in the air and flicked the tip of her tail to spin.

Not even getting high enough in the air, Nightpaw came crashing down and hitting her shoulder on the ground. She let out a wail of pain, curling in a ball and starting to whimper in pain.

Nightpaw heard Halfthroat let out a growl and she winced as he harshly prodded her in the side with a paw. *Does he think I can do it again?*

"Get up, you idiot." He growled, sitting down. "You're pathetic, Nightpaw. You can't even perform a move that will save your life without screwing up and making a fool of yourself." Halfthroat snarled in disdain, glaring at his apprentice.

Nightpaw lowered her ears, taking in every word as she painfully rose to her paws and sat hunched over as her mentor once again scolded her.

"Get your shoulder treated then get back here before I claw your ears off." He hissed and whipped around, slapping Nightpaw in the face with his tail as he stalked away.

Nightpaw sighed and began limping towards the camp. Her ears stayed low and her tail dragged behind her. With her eyes fixed on the ground, Nightpaw slowly headed for camp.

Why did I have to get Halfthroat as my mentor? The thought haunted her just as much as Halfthroat's menacing yet prideful personality.

"Nightpaw!" Reedpaw's voice made Nightpaw glance up from her paws. Her brother was trotting over to her, his eyes gleaming and tail high. "How was training?"

Nightpaw felt envious at her littermates' cheeriness and swallowed a wail in her throat. "It was fine," she lied, brushing past him towards Mottlesong and Blackheart's den.

Reedpaw followed her, not getting the message that her mood wasn't as joyous as his. "I went hunting with Tawnywillow and we found a huge nest of mice!" He rambled, making Nightpaw's mood brighten slightly. "You should've seen the look on Dawnpaw's face when I caught more mice then her!"

"How many did you catch?" Asked Nightpaw, finding Reedpaw's bubbly mood infectious. She looked at her brother, seeing his chest puffed out in pride.

"Five," he boasted, casting a proud look over his shoulder at the fresh-kill pile where his mice lay. "Dawnpaw caught three and

Vixenpool caught one."

Nightpaw blinked in amazement. "How many mice were in the nest?" She asked, intrigued to know how many mice were in that big of a nest.

Reedpaw let out a purr and shrugged his shoulders. Though they were just over 3 moons old, they were still rather small. *Since Blazestar changed the Warrior Code so many seasons ago, kits that were old enough to eat prey were fit enough to be apprentices.*

Nightpaw heard stories from Deerstripe and Cloverleap about the ShadowClan leader that ruled the Clan that lived in the pine forests a long, long time ago.

Formerly named Blazestripe, the DawnClan leader of old had risen to be a noble and kind leader. When queens in DawnClan started to complain about their kits being too big and eager to play fight even with smaller, more defenseless kits in the nursery, Blazestripe made it his mission to when he became leader, he would alter the Warrior Code to aid queens when raising their kits.

When he brought it up at a Gathering, the GlacierClan leader at the time, Cloudstar blatantly accused Blazestar of going rogue and wanting to drift away from the Warrior Code itself.

Blazestar defended himself pretty well and one of the queens from DawnClan named Wasptail explained the issue, Cloudstar was forced to back down and the Warrior Code was changed.

What surprised Nightpaw the most was when many other queens from the other Clans agreed with Wasptail. They were named Meadowfire of NightClan, Wasptail of DawnClan, Owlpool of GlacierClan, and Voleheart of OakClan.

"Nightpaw!" Reedpaw's call cut into her thoughts and Nightpaw blinked. "Are you listening to me?"

Nightpaw blinked a few times, looking at her brother. "No, sorry, Reedpaw." She admitted, ducking her head. "Do you know if Mottlesong or Blackheart are available?" Nightpaw asked.

Reedpaw eyed her with a weird look in his eyes and shrugged. "Why don't you ask them and I'll get us something to eat?" He suggested, looking over his shoulder once more. "I'll get us some of the mice I caught."

Nightpaw nodded and turned away, padding into the medicine cat's den. "Hello?" She called nervously.

"Nightpaw?" Answered Mottlesong's voice. "Is that you?"

"Yes," she replied, feeling better that Mottlesong was there. "I need you to look at my shoulder. I hurt it during battle training."

The medicine cat frowned and looked at her right shoulder, giving it a sniff. "Battle training so soon?" She asked. "Usually, you'd be learning how to hunt before you learn how to fight."

Nightpaw wanted to screech in agreement but she shrugged. "Halfthroat wanted to battle train before I learn how to hunt." She meowed simply.

Mottlesong said nothing, only nodded and looking at Nightpaw. "You don't need any herbs," she meowed. "If it starts to hurt again, tell me or Blackheart."

"Okay," Nightpaw rose to her paws and nodded to the medicine cat. "Thanks, Mottlesong." Without another word, she swiftly turned away and padded out of the medicine cat den.

In the camp, patrols were returning and cats were eating and sharing tongues. Tawnywillow and Iceleaf were chatting with a vole between them. Nightpaw looked around to find Reedpaw waving his paw to get her attention.

She looked down and saw two mice at his paws. Nightpaw smiled and headed towards her brother, her mouth watering at the sight of

the plump pair of mice.

"Please, Russetbriar!" Nightpaw halted, looking over at the nursery where Russetbriar and her kits were out in the sun. "Please teach us about Goldenstar!"

Russetbriar looked down at her kits, her eyes glittering with amusement. "I'm not much of a storyteller," she purred. Looking around, she made eye contact with Nightpaw. "But Nightpaw could tell you a thing or two about Blazestar, the leader of DawnClan long before Clearstar."

Before Nightpaw could run, a stampede of kits raced towards her and leaped on her, clinging to her fur like fleas. Nightpaw let out a yelp of surprise and toppled over, hearing Reedpaw laugh.

"Too many kits!" She wailed, feeling paws pummel her body as the kits crawled all over her.

"Watch out, Nightpaw," the voices of Songpaw and Dawnpaw made dread wash through Nightpaw. "You'll suffocate under all that kitten fluff!"

"Yeah!" Sneered the voice of Dawnpaw. "Long live Nightpaw, smothered in kits!" Nightpaw flattened her ears, feeling shame whip through her.

"Songpaw! Dawnpaw!" Shouted the angry voice of Halfthroat, making the kits on Nightpaw scatter with fearful squeaks as they retreated back to their mother.

As Nightpaw scrambled to her paws to look at her mentor, Songpaw and Dawnpaw flattened their ears. They looked scared, which was an emotion Nightpaw had never seen before in their eyes.

"Halfthroat, I-" Nightpaw tried to explain to her mentor that she would eat real fast then get back to training. Halfthroat interrupted her, glaring down her littermates as Reedpaw slunk over to Nightpaw with the mice dangling from his mouth by their tails.

"I've seen enough foolishness from you two," growled Nightpaw's mentor as Nightpaw quickly began to scarf down her mouse. "Go

straight to Deerstripe and Cloverleap and check them for ticks then get them new bedding."

Songpaw looked outraged and unsheathed his claws while Dawnpaw stared at her paws with guilt in her blue eyes. "You're not our mentors!" He retorted.

Nightpaw gulped down a bite of her mouse and nervously looked at Halfthroat, who looked furious. She took another bite of her prey, shared a look with Reedpaw, and looked back at Songpaw.

"I will tell your mentors about your behavior and you won't go to this moon's Gathering!" Halfthroat threatened. "If you don't scram now, I will make sure you will *never* leave the apprentice's den!"

Dawnpaw flinched and scrambled away to the elder's den, much to Nightpaw's amazement. *She's just as afraid of Halfthroat as I am.* She realized, turning her attention back to Songpaw.

"Go ahead then, do it!" Her arrogant brother sneered. "Run to your *crush* like the pathetic kit you are!"

Halfthroat let out a snarl and launched at Songpaw, whose eyes widened in shock and fell on his back underneath Nightpaw's mentor. "Call me pathetic again, apprentice, and you'll never become a *true* warrior." Spat Halfthroat.

Nightpaw's eyes widened and she looked at Reedpaw, who looked just as surprised as she was. *Was Halfthroat going to attack Songpaw?*

Halfthroat spat in Songpaw's face and shoved him towards the elder's den where Dawnpaw was watching with wide, fearful eyes. As the tom scrambled away, Halfthroat turned to his apprentice.

"Stand up for yourself next time, Nightpaw." He growled and Nightpaw quickly nodded as he stalked away. *What just happened?*

Chapter Seven

"Again,"

"Yes, Halfthroat."

"Again!"

"Yes, Halfthroat."

Nightpaw ran at her mentor, leaping into the air and crashing down on his shoulders. Her paws dug into his back as he shook his body, trying to get her off. With a hiss, Nightpaw began to swat at his back.

Teeth sank into her tail and with a yelp of pain, Nightpaw was thrown to the ground and a massive paw held her to the ground by her chest. Halfthroat stood towering over her, eyes glinting with disappointment.

"You can do better than *that*, Nightpaw." He grunted, letting her up after a moment. A few days passed since Halfthroat lashed out at Dawnpaw and Songpaw and they didn't bother Nightpaw since. Only a few glares from Songpaw that made her pelt prickle seemed to be it.

Dawnpaw had been unusually quiet after Halfthroat pinned Songpaw to the ground. She always had a sense of unease orbiting her pelt whenever she caught sight of Halfthroat and Nightpaw padding into the camp after a day of training.

Nightpaw got to her paws, shaking the dirt from her black fur and looking at her mentor. "Can I try the front paw blow?" She asked, seeing Halfthroat look at her. "I think I got it this time."

Halfthroat groaned and begrudgingly nodded. "Fine, but do it-" He cut off when Nightpaw landed her forepaw on his head. Her mentor crumpled to the ground, much to her dismay.

"Halfthroat!" Cried Nightpaw, crouching down beside her mentor's head. Surely she didn't strike him that hard! She shook her mentor by the shoulders, panicking that she may have hit him too hard.

"Nightpaw?" Ivyheart bounded over to her, Honeypaw at her heels. "What's wrong?"

Nightpaw looked at the she-cat, her eyes wide. "I-I didn't mean to!" She squeaked, looking at Halfthroat's unmoving shape. "D-did I kill him?" The apprentice asked in a small voice.

The silver tabby warrior bent over and shoved Halfthroat's shoulder with a paw. The tom groaned and swatted her away, making her purr with amusement. "Not quite," she meowed to Nightpaw. "Next time, don't whack him too hard."

Nightpaw breathed a sigh of relief, looking at Halfthroat. "Should I get Mottlesong?" She asked, feeling better.

Ivyheart looked at Honeypaw, who was batting at a butterfly. "May as well," she meowed. "I'll get this big oof to camp and you two get Mottlesong."

Nightpaw nodded and padded away with Honeypaw at her side. After a while of walking in silence, Nightpaw glanced at the other apprentice. "So," she meowed awkwardly. "How's being Ivyheart's apprentice been?"

Honeypaw shrugged, making Nightpaw frown. "She goes easy on me and she's very patient." She meowed simply. "She's nothing like how Rosespring is with Littlepaw, that's for sure."

Nightpaw tilted her head, confused. "How is Rosespring with Littlepaw?" She questioned, tail flicking. *Is Rosespring like Halfthroat? Brutal and malicious?*

The golden-brown tabby she-cat looked at Nightpaw. "From what Littlepaw told me, she's a bit snappy and slightly scary." She answered warily.

"Scary?" Nightpaw couldn't believe her ears. "Rosespring?" Could Rosespring also have been Halfthroat's apprentice before her?

Honeypaw shrugged, seeming more annoyed than when silence hung between them. "Toms can be liars," she meowed and flicked her left ear.

Nightpaw flinched slightly. "Not all toms," she pointed out. *Reedpaw wouldn't lie to me, would he?* She quickly brushed the thought away.

The tabby apprentice glared at her sharply, making Nightpaw's pelt prickle. "Any cat can be a liar," she hissed. "From the oldest elder to the smallest kit. And if a cat within OakClan is a traitor, we will claw their fur off." Honeypaw studied Nightpaw with her teeth bared. "Do you understand that, Nightpaw?"

Chapter Eight

Nightpaw pushed through the bramble barrier protecting the camp. Honeypaw silently brushed by and bounded towards Aspenpaw and Littlepaw. The younger apprentice sighed, hearing the words of the older apprentice echoing in her ears.

"Any cat can be a liar," she'd hissed. "From the oldest elder to the smallest kit. And if a cat within OakClan is a traitor, we will claw their fur off." Honeypaw studied Nightpaw with her teeth bared. "Do you understand that, Nightpaw?"

Nightpaw understood. *Am I a traitor for simply existing?* She wondered and sighed, her shoulders sagging. She dragged her paws towards the elder's den, ignoring the pang of hunger in her belly and sat down, her ears down.

"What's the matter, Nightpaw?" Asked Cloverleap, lifting her head from washing her back. Nightpaw looked up at the elder, feeling miserable.

"Honeypaw is being mean," she answered meekly, noticing how much of a kit she probably sounded. "Well, she was acting strange when we were heading back to camp after training."

"Strange?" Echoed Deerstripe, looking at Nightpaw. "Honeypaw is a complicated apprentice, Nightpaw." She paused, looking at Cloverleap. "Does she know about Marigoldscar and Bravebranch's other kits?"

Other kits? Nightpaw wondered, looking at both elders with a very confused look. *How many litters did Marigoldscar and Bravebranch have? Aren't Littlepaw, Honeypaw, and Aspenpaw their first and only litter?*

Cloverleap looked at her denmate, shaking her head. "I don't think so," she meowed.

"It's forbidden to talk about their first litter, Deerstripe." Meowed a voice from behind Nightpaw. Turning around to face the new cat, she came nose to nose with Blackheart.

The medicine cat apprentice seemed calm and collected as he carried some unknown herbs towards Cloverleap and put them in front of her paws.

Deerstripe flattened her ears, eyes burning. "I know that, Blackheart." She meowed stiffly. "But Nightpaw here doesn't know the tale of Hazelhawk and Ravenwatcher."

Before she could go on, Blackheart hissed. "And she doesn't need to know it, Deerstripe." He spat her name as though it were a bad piece of prey. Nightpaw flinched, her fur prickling with fear. "It's a story that haunts our Clan and GlacierClan, we don't need the younger generations to be learning about such treason."

Cloverleap snorted, lapping up her herbs. "You are no better, Blackheart." She shot back, surprising Nightpaw. *She's normally kind and not snappy.*

This time, Blackheart flinched. "That's in the past, Cloverleap." He meowed carefully. "My past mistakes mean little to me now."

Deerstripe let out a growl, glaring at Blackheart with blazing yellow eyes. "Those 'mistakes' of yours were precious to all the Clans, medicine cat." She hissed, saying Blackheart's rank with venom in her voice. "Not to mention, one of them is part of the Clan you live in right now."

Blackheart said nothing as he fumed, storming out of the den without another word. Nightpaw looked at the elders, shocked at how brutal they were to him.

Nightpaw dipped her head uneasily to the two elders and hurried out of the den. She shook out her fur and looked across the camp to the medicine den where Blackheart was disappearing inside.

I have to check on Halfthroat to see if he's okay. She told herself and forced her paws into movement towards the den. Not even getting to the fresh-kill pile when Applestar padded out of his den with Spiderstem on his heels distracted her.

The leader looked furious as he strode towards the Tall Tree. Behind him, Spiderstem looked frantic and worried as he leaped onto the second branch under his leader.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Tall Tree for a Clan meeting!" Yowled Applestar, his anger evident in his tone.

Nightpaw felt awkward standing in the middle of the clearing like a fool and looked around for her denmates. Littlepaw and Aspenpaw were poking their heads out of the apprentice den and Honeypaw was coming back from the dirtplace.

Where are Reedpaw, Dawnpaw, and Songpaw? She thought, scanning the camp once more but not finding her siblings at all. *Strange.*

Without another thought of her siblings' absence, Nightpaw spotted her parents sitting down with each other. Her heart warmed and she padded towards them, her tail high.

As she settled down between Voletuft and Gorsewhisper, Applestar began to speak. Nightpaw noticed Spiderstem was looking anxiously around the camp as if searching for something or someone.

What's his problem? She asked herself but shook her head and looked at her leader. He seemed tense on the third branch of the Tall Tree.

"Cats of OakClan!" Applestar meowed, his eyes narrowed. "GlacierClan has once again stolen prey from us, leaving us hungry and weak. They also claim we are in the wrong and that *we* stole their prey."

Nightpaw's eyes widened in shock. *Why would a bunch of fish-loving cats eat forest prey?* She wondered. All around her, cats were yowling insults and words Nightpaw had never heard before.

"Those arrogant fish-faces!" Yowled Iceleaf, her eyes blazing with anger. "They should know forest prey is ours!"

"They deserve to be taught a lesson!" Chimed Flightclaw, leaping to his paws.

"We should tear them to shreds!" Nightpaw flinched at the snarl in Songpaw's hiss as he looked up at Applestar. "Make them pay for their crimes!"

Many cats cheered in agreement, making Nightpaw shudder. *Songpaw is so violent, sort of like Halfthroat.* She glanced at Applestar, who was looking around the camp with his hackles raised.

"We will make Snowstar and her Clan of code-breakers pay!" He yowled. "Those participating in the battle that will happen at once will be as follows: Spiderstem, Iceleaf, Ivyheart, Honeypaw, Littlepaw, Songpaw, Dawnpaw, Nightpaw, Reedpaw, Toadpad, Halfthroat, Blizzardflake, Gorsewhisper, Bravebranch, Scorchtail, Blueheart, Flightclaw, and Redstripe." Declared Applestar, leaping down from the Tall Tree.

Nightpaw sighed, her shoulders slumping as the thought of hurting other cats made *her* feel pain. *I'll have to do it to defend my Clan's honor.* She reminded herself, failing to lift her spirits.

Reedpaw bounded up to her, his eyes shimmering. "I can't wait!" He meowed, puffing out his fur and crouching down, claws unsheathed. "I'm going to shred the pelt of whoever stole our prey!"

Nightpaw looked horrified, staring at her usual kind-hearted brother. "We won't be fighting to kill," she meowed sheepishly.

Reedpaw purred. "Of course not!" He meowed, rising to his paws and nudging her shoulder. "We're just teaching those fish-breaths a lesson!"

Songpaw's voice made Nightpaw's neck fur rise. "Come on, Reedpaw," he meowed icily. "They stole our prey which could cost a few lives from our Clan." The tom looked at his brother then to Nightpaw with a sneer. "An eye or an eye, am I right?"

Before she could respond, Applestar rounded up his warriors and apprentices and began to lead them into the forest. Nightpaw hesitantly followed behind Scorchtail as they left the camp behind and followed their leader towards the GlacierClan border.

Chapter Nine

"OakClan!" Yowled Applestar as they reached the GlacierClan camp. Nightpaw felt tense as she heard her leader and unsheathed her claws. "Attack!"

As they raced towards the front of the camp, Rosespring and Blueheart surged forward and tackled two cats that were guarding the camp.

As they dealt with the guards, Nightpaw was thrust into the unfamiliar Clan's camp and came nose to nose with a calico she-cat. She looked around Nightpaw's age, if not a bit younger.

The she-cat charged at Nightpaw with a snarl. Nightpaw narrowed her eyes and lashed out with a paw, slicing through fur and skin on the other cat's cheek.

Blood sprayed from the wound and Nightpaw felt something burst within her, new and exhilarating. With this new feeling in her belly, Nightpaw felt stronger and she let out a growl.

She leaped towards the she-cat, claws, and paws outstretched. The calico she-cat braced herself and Nightpaw crashed into her shoulder, throwing her off her paws and into the ground.

Pain seared through Nightpaw's left ear and she hissed, feeling her opponent's claws tear through the tip, leaving a nick. Hind paws hit her in the chest, sending her breath rushing from her lungs.

Nightpaw stumbled, feeling teeth sink into her shoulder with a shriek of pain. Desperate to get free from her attacker, Nightpaw reared on her hind legs and delivered the front paw blow on top of the she-cat's head.

She crumpled to the ground, groaning. In a heartbeat, she flew up at Nightpaw and pinned her to the ground, claws sinking into her

chest where her paws held her down.

"Nice try, OakClan cat," spat the she-cat. "You're only an apprentice like me, aren't you?" Nightpaw didn't answer with words. She lifted her right front paw and kicked up with her hind legs.

The apprentice let out a grunt and screeched when Nightpaw slashed her face, surging up and tackling the she-cat. "Not so tough when I gain the upper paw, are you?" She taunted.

"Tawnypaw!" A yowl from her right made Nightpaw turn her head just in time to see a brown tabby tom racing towards her, eyes blazing. "Get off her!"

The tom crashing directly into Nightpaw's ribs, making her yelp with pain as she slammed into the ground, dazed. The other cat wasted no time in scoring his claws across her flanks.

Nightpaw ached all over, even from fighting Tawnypaw. She looked up at the tom, seeing anger blaze in his amber eyes. *He's so protective over Tawnypaw, why?*

Regaining her senses, Nightpaw bared her teeth and as the tom bent down to snap at her, she reached up and took his ear in her jaws and pulled hard.

"Argh!" Yowled the tom and he jerked his head away, letting Nightpaw scramble to his paws. Blood oozed from his ear where Nightpaw tore the tip and he trembled with pain and rage, clearly showing in his eyes.

"Hickorypaw!" Wailed Tawnypaw, catching both Nightpaw and the tom's attention. The she-cat was staring at the motionless body of a gray tom.

Hickorypaw lost all interest in Nightpaw and he scrambled over to his fallen Clanmate, eyes wide and watery. Nightpaw darted after him, eyes wide with horror. "Finchheart!" Wailed the tom, shoving his nose into the tom's fur.

Nightpaw scanned Finchheart's body, seeing blood gushing from a nasty wound on his neck. *Who would do this?* Nightpaw was

horrified at the tom's dead corpse, looking at Tawnypaw and Hickorypaw, she knew they were as shocked as she was.

"I'm so sorry," she rasped, looking at the two apprentices with sympathy and grief. Tawnypaw lowered her head while Hickorypaw looked up at Nightpaw. "I never knew this would go this far."

Hickorypaw said nothing, only grasped the dead warrior's scruff in his jaws and dragged him away with Tawnypaw's help. Nightpaw sighed, sadness slicing through her heart as she saw Finchheart's head loll limply.

Pushing away for the enemy warrior, Nightpaw turned back to the sound of battle and saw Reedpaw tangled with a shadow. With a jolt, Nightpaw realized he was fighting a black she-cat, not a shadow.

She bounded towards her brother, letting out a hiss as she bowled the other cat over and slashed at her ears. "Leave my brother alone!" Nightpaw spat.

The she-cat didn't seem fazed as she flew at Nightpaw, rolling in a ball of snarling and claws. Nightpaw's claws tore her flesh and the other cat hissed in pain, eyes narrowed.

Suddenly, her chest exploded in immense pain and Nightpaw let out a gurgling screech of agony as claws slashed her exposed chest. Blood welled from the wound and some began to bubble at her lips.

After a moment, her opponent backed off and a far away yowl signaled to Nightpaw's Clanmates to retreat. However, Nightpaw could barely keep her eyes open as darkness tugged at the apprentice's body, dragging her into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Ten

Nightpaw opened her eyes, expecting to be in Mottlesong's den but instead, much to her surprise, she was in a starry field with gorgeous willow trees littered with leaves and endless life.

Beautiful views surrounded the apprentice, making her gawk like a kit. Not only was there an abundance of life, but so many cats scattered around the large area took Nightpaw's breath right from her lungs.

So many cats in such a large stretch of land made Nightpaw nervous. How many cats were here? How did they get here? The black-furred she-cat looked around, padding in a random direction to explore the new land.

Kits, apprentices, warriors, queens, and elders were all over the place. Some laughing, some playing in the bright sunshine, and some lounging about sharing tongues with particularly plump prey being eaten as they shared their stories.

A squeal from a pawful of kits caught Nightpaw's attention, bringing a smile to her face as she saw six or seven kits chasing each other while some cats watched on and laughed.

This place is perfect! Nightpaw thought as she headed for the kits, making note of how she didn't feel any pain or exhaustion anymore. *Maybe this is where every cat wants to go.*

The largest of the kits, a dark brown tabby tom with bright yellow eyes spotted Nightpaw and charged over, his friends following in suit. "Hi, newcomer!" He squeaked.

Nightpaw couldn't hold back a grin. "Hi, kit," she purred. "Who are all of you?" She asked, looking at each kit with a sudden warmth in her chest.

The brown tabby kit stuck out his tongue. "I'm Stripedkit!" He

meowed, turning to the other kits. Stripedkit pointed at a tabby calico she-cat with green eyes. "That's Spotkit," he meowed and looked at the tom next to her. They looked the exact same, Nightpaw noticed. "That's her brother, his name is Sunkit because of his eyes."

"They look like the sun," Nightpaw guessed and Sunkit nodded. She turned her attention back to Stripedkit, who was scratching his ear with a small hind paw.

"These three are my siblings," the tabby kit squeaked, nodding to a yellow tabby she-cat with blue eyes, a dark gray swirled tabby tom with orange eyes and a dusty brown tabby she-cat with bright green eyes. "The yellow tabby is Risingkit, the gray tabby is Darkkit, and the brown tabby is Dustkit."

"And the last one?" Questioned Nightpaw, nodding to a white tom with the brightest of blue eyes.

"Oh, that's Whitekit," Stripedkit meowed. "He's the youngest out of all of us."

"Hi, Whitekit," purred the apprentice. "You have beautiful eyes, little one." Nightpaw heard a small laugh and she looked at Dustkit, confused.

The dusty tabby she-cat was looking at Nightpaw in amusement. "He's deaf, you know." She pointed out, looking at the white tom. "That's how he died."

Nightpaw stared at the she-kit in awe and slight horror. "D-died?" She choked out, eyes wide.

"Yeah!" Chirped Stripedkit from next to Sunkit. "We're all dead! That's why we have stars in our fur."

Nightpaw never noticed the small stars gleaming in the pelts of all the kits. She gulped, feeling sick. "H-how did you die?" She asked nervously.

Stripedkit didn't look affected by her rude question. "I was stillborn, like my siblings." He meowed, flicking his tiny tail.

Nightpaw looked at the kits, feeling sad and hollow. "W-where is your leader, Stripedkit?" She whispered.

"Leader?" Meowed a new voice and Nightpaw spun around, eyes wide and claws unsheathed. "No cat is the leader of StarClan, apprentice."

"*StarClan*?" Nightpaw repeated, choking on her words. "Am I dead?" She asked the new cat, in horror.

The cat in front of her shook his broad head, blue eyes glinting with amusement. "Certainly not, Nightpaw." He purred and looked at the kits. "Run along now, kits, go play."

Stripedkit smiled up at the tom, as did the other kits. "Goodbye, Nightpaw! Bye Aquastar!" He chirped and proceeded to chase Sunkit and Spotkit.

"Aquastar?" Nightpaw echoed, looking at the tom with confusion in her eyes. "Are you the leader around here?" She asked.

Aquastar shook his head once more, tail flicking. "As I've said, Nightpaw, no cat is the leader of StarClan." He meowed.

"Oh," she meowed awkwardly, shifting her paws. "Why am I here...?" Nightpaw looked around the fields of StarClan, noticing how perfect the territory was all of a sudden.

"I have a prophecy for you, Nightpaw." The leader answered, staring at Nightpaw with his blue eyes glimmering. "*The one born from the darkness will divide and taint the Clans. The half-throated deceiver will rip one away and the Clans will never see the light of day.*"

Nightpaw blinked in surprise, looking at Aquastar. "W-why tell me?" She asked shakily. "I'm only an apprentice. Why not tell Applestar or one of the medicine cats?"

Aquastar studied her, the starry plains around her starting to blur. "Because," he spoke softly. "You are the part of the prophecy."

Chapter Eleven

A paw prodded Nightpaw's side and she slowly opened her eyes, groaning. She was no longer in StarClan, much to her relief. Mottlesong was standing over her, gazing at her intently as she held a bundle of herbs.

Looking around, Nightpaw saw Honeypaw, Reedpaw, Dawnpaw, Scorchtail, and Redstripe laying in their own nests, patched with herbs and cobwebs.

"W-what happened?" She croaked, her throat dry. *I don't remember a thing.* "D-did we win?"

Without answering, Mottlesong turned away for a moment and carried a bundle of soaked moss. She set it by Nightpaw's muzzle, watching as the wounded apprentice began to lap gingerly at it.

The cold water rushed down her throat, making her gasp and lick more urgently. *This is the best water I've ever tasted!* She thought as she eagerly drank.

When she pulled her head away and licked her lips, Mottlesong began to redress her wounds. Her body ached, with grief and regret. *I should never have attacked Tawnypaw.* Nightpaw thought, wincing as her wounds were exposed. *Then Hickorypaw could've saved Finchheart.*

"Lie on your back, Nightpaw." Mewed the medicine cat, slicing through her thoughts. "I need to check that chest wound you have."

Nightpaw nodded, shifting her position so she was rolled onto her back. Pain sparked in her back but she ignored it, biting her lip. "What happened?" She repeated.

Mottlesong didn't look at her as she replied as she worked. "The cat that was attacking you slashed your chest by the looks of it." She meowed. "It's deep and it caused you to slip unconscious. You'll be

fine if you rest and don't open it up."

"How are the others who fought?" Nightpaw pressed, seeing a shadow on the medicine cat's face. "Did anyone die?" *I never saw any of my Clanmates in StarClan, I think*.

Mottlesong nodded, making Nightpaw tense. "Blizzardflake was killed by a split neck." She meowed sadly, her eyes misting. The older she-cat shook her head, the emotion evaporating. "The Clan is in mourning for him, but we will go on."

Nightpaw didn't reply as Mottlesong drew away from the she-cat, eyes distant. She didn't try to stop her as she forced through the pain of getting to her paws and staggering out of the den.

It was sunhigh and not a lot of cats were presently in camp. Only a few were sharing prey or clustered around Spiderstem, asking to go on a border patrol or on a hunting patrol.

Russetbriar's kits weren't playing outside the nursery. *Probably mourning the loss of their father.* Nightpaw guessed. She was never close to the senior warrior, but she respected him.

Nightpaw forced her paws to take her into the clearing where Halfthroat was sharing prey with Ivyheart. *I suppose he would be a bit more worried that his apprentice nearly died in her first battle.* She thought bitterly as she approached the two.

Ivyheart noticed her first. "Nightpaw!" She meowed, nudging Halfthroat. "You're okay!"

Halfthroat looked away from her. Was he proud of her that she survived her first real fight? Nightpaw shifted her attention to the silver tabby she-cat.

"Just in pain," she answered, looking into Ivyheart's friendly green eyes. "I'm ready to get back to training," she meowed and glanced at her mentor.

The gray scarred warrior looked at her in surprise, but masked his emotion and nodded coolly. "Are you sure?" He meowed, tail flicking. "You just got out of the medicine cat den and you're barely

able to stand or walk, let alone train."

Anger rose in her paws and she flattened her ears, narrowing her eyes. "I'm fine," she repeated, tail lashing. "I'll be ready for whatever you throw at me, Halfthroat."

Her mentor looked pleased that she was upset and he rose to his paws, stretching. "Very well, Nightpaw." He meowed, looking her over with intimidating green eyes. "Let's go *train*."

The way he said it made Nightpaw shiver, but she nodded nonetheless and followed her mentor out of the camp, sending Ivyheart a small smile before scampering after him.

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Halfthroat stalked into a clearing, one Nightpaw had never seen before. He stopped, turning to her with his eyes dancing with malice. "Well?" Prompted Nightpaw's mentor. "Fight me, unless you're too scared."

"I'm not scared of you, Halfthroat." Nightpaw meowed boldly, only half lying. "And I'll prove it." Without warning, she darted towards her mentor, ramming her shoulder into his chest and hearing the breath rush from his lips.

Without missing a beat, Nightpaw slashed her paw across his cheek with her claws sheathed. She felt a massive paw hit her in the head and she staggered, her vision blurry momentarily.

Halfthroat grinned at her. A sick, twisted smile that made Nightpaw's blood boil with rage. She let out a screech and leaped on his back, digging her claws into his shoulders as he reared on his hind legs to shake her off.

Nightpaw flung her body to the left and crashed to the ground with Halfthroat hitting the ground with her. Pain crept into her left shoulder but she ignored it with a hiss, kicking with her hind paws at Halfthroat's back.

Her mentor laughed and unsheathed his claws, digging a paw of claws into her right hind leg and hanging on. Nightpaw growled,

unsheathing her claws and clawing at his shoulder in an attempt to get him off.

Halfthroat sank his teeth into her leg and pulled her towards him without warning. Warm blood began to escape her new wound and she winced slightly. Claws sank into her shoulder and Nightpaw let out a cry of pain.

She frantically looked around, desperate for something to defend herself with. A stick lay not far away from her right shoulder and she looked back at her mentor as he pinned her down.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she weakly slashed at his chest and reached for the stick, grasping it in her teeth. Turning her head around quickly, she shut her eyes as she saw teeth heading for her neck.

Crack! The sound of the stick splintering made Nightpaw open her eyes to see Halfthroat biting the stick. Hissing, Nightpaw kicked her mentor in the belly and surged upward, pinning him to the ground as she panted over him.

Halfthroat looked tired but his eyes glinted with pride that made Nightpaw warm all over her body. "Well done, Nightpaw," he meowed approvingly, pushing her off and getting up.

"Thanks," she breathed, panting. Nightpaw looked at the stick lying at her paws. "It was a last resort." She confessed, looking up at her mentor with wide eyes.

Halfthroat nodded. "You did well," he praised. Suddenly, his eyes hardened and he stared at Nightpaw, who shifted her paws uncomfortably. "Nightpaw," he meowed, his tail flicking. "When I became a warrior, my mentor made me keep a promise that I uphold to this day." Her mentor paused. "Do you know what that promise was?"

Nightpaw looked at her mentor's eyes, blinking. "To protect your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?" She guessed quietly, to which Halfthroat shook his head.

"He made me swear to put my Clan above all else, even if that means that cats have to die. The Clan comes first, no matter what." Halfthroat's eyes bore into Nightpaw's, intense and cold.

Nightpaw flicked her tail, slightly unnerved. "Do you want me to put my Clan above all else?" She asked.

Halfthroat smirked. "Yes," he meowed. "Nightpaw, do you swear to put your Clan above all else even if it costs the lives of your friends or family?"

Nightpaw forced herself to look Halfthroat in the eyes, her own burning with determination. "I swear it, Halfthroat." She breathed, her paws trembling as her mentor nodded.

"Good," rumbled her mentor. "I think you're ready." Nightpaw frowned at Halfthroat, confused.

"Ready?" She echoed warily. "Ready for what?" Nightpaw looked her mentor in the eyes, searching for any emotion as he spoke.

Halfthroat smiled a twisted, wicked smile that made Nightpaw's claws curl into the ground. "Ready to meet the others."

Chapter Twelve

"Remember, behave and don't pick any fights, there's a truce for a reason." Nightpaw nodded, padding beside Halfthroat. "Trust no one and don't share our secrets."

"And remember," Halfthroat looked at her, his eyes intense. "*Never* show any weakness, it gives them power that you don't want." He paused, looking forward as they neared the Gathering hollow was in the back of the hollow, stood a large, tall tree.

Nightpaw stared at the tree in awe, wanting to climb every branch to get to the top just to see the territories all at once. "What's that?" She whispered to Reedpaw once Halfthroat had gone.

She had never gone to a Gathering, unlike her siblings. Dawnpaw, Songpaw, Reedpaw, Littlepaw, Honeypaw, and Aspenpaw had already gone to one Gathering without Nightpaw.

With a sigh, Nightpaw followed behind Halfthroat and Ivyheart as they led the way behind Applestar and Spiderstem. The Gathering hollow was bigger than the camp, Nightpaw noticed. Cats were all over the place, much like her visit to StarClan a couple of days ago.

Pushing away her memory of the dream where Stripedkit told her Whitekit was deaf and that was how he died, Nightpaw bounded down the slope and skidded to a stop near a group of DawnClan warriors.

There was one cat who met her eyes all of a sudden. "OakClan is here!" He declared to his Clanmates and the other cats sitting with him. "Come here and introduce yourself," he invited.

Nightpaw gulped. Reedpaw had bounced away towards a few NightClan apprentices and was chatting with them. After considering her options for a moment, she took a deep breath and padded towards the warriors.

"About time OakClan got here," commented a red tabby she-cat, looking at a golden-brown tabby she-cat. "I thought we'd have to wait until Leafbare for them to arrive."

The tom, a golden tabby, fixed her with a stern look, making her fall silent. "Thornbite," he meowed, tail flicking around his paws. "OakClan lives further away from here than any other Clan does, you know that."

Thornbite? Nightpaw was horrified at the name the she-cat had. *Who names their warrior Thornbite?* She kept quiet, shifting her paws uncomfortably.

Thornbite sniffed her nose in the air indignantly. "Whatever," she snorted, sending a nasty look over at Nightpaw. "What's your name?"

Nightpaw flinched, looking down at her paws nervously. "N-Nightpaw," she muttered, wishing a hole devoured her right then and there.

"Hello, Nightpaw," purred the red tabby she-cat kindly. "My name is Robinfire." She looked at the tom, who was smiling at Nightpaw. "That's Thorntail, Thornbite's father."

Nightpaw looked up, surprised. "Y-you named your daughter after yourself?" She meowed, in shock.

Thorntail let out a noise that made Nightpaw flinch. Then she realized he was laughing! She tilted her head, frowning.

"You're funny, Nightpaw," he bellowed, eyes dancing with amusement. "I didn't name this grouch, her mother did when she got a thorn in her paw pad when she was a few days old."

Robinfire let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "She was so snappy at Tanglewatcher, Halfsnow requested during her warrior ceremony that she be named Thornbite."

The golden-brown tabby she-cat glared at her Clanmates, cheeks red in embarrassment. "Shut up!" She hissed, curling her lip.

Thorntail chuckled and looked at Nightpaw, but not in the eyes. Instead, he was looking at her hind legs that were tucked underneath her. "How'd you get that scar?" He asked, pointing with a paw to the scar on her hind leg from Halfthroat.

Nightpaw flattened her ears and curled her tail around her legs tightly. "T-there was a scuffle at the border with GlacierClan," she lied. "The warrior I had been fighting got me."

Robinfire looked sympathetic. "I'm sorry, Nightpaw," she meowed comfortingly. Looking to her left, Nightpaw followed her gaze to a light gray tabby tom with a nicked ear. "Dewpath here got his nicked ear while fighting a GlacierClan border patrol as well."

Nightpaw nodded half-heartedly, remembering that this was a Gathering. *When this is over, maybe Halfthroat can show me who the others are.*

"Cats from all Clans!" Meowed Snowstar from the large tree. "Let the Gathering begin!" At her words, the cats who were gathered below settled down and halted their conversations.

A green-eyed black-furred tom with white hind legs stood on a branch just higher than Snowstar. "I shall begin," he meowed. "NightClan is doing well in the late Greenleaf warmth. Prey is abundant and the warm weather welcomes rain that makes our territory flourish with life."

Murmurs of congratulations met Nightpaw's ears, making one twitch. *I remember hearing Iceleaf tell Blizzardflake that NightClan lives in a rocky ravine.* She recalled.

"We also welcome three new warriors into the warrior's den. Congratulations Firestripe, Snowmask, and Toadtail!" The tom announced, whom Nightpaw now realized was Duststar.

"Firestripe! Snowmask! Toadtail!" Cheered a brown she-cat with the greenest of eyes who sat next to a rather handsome ginger tabby tom.

The tom looked embarrassed and flattened his ears, his cheeks flushing. *I guess he's Firestripe,* Nightpaw guessed. She turned her attention back to the tree.

"We also have three new apprentices, Sneezepaw, Shellpaw, and Brokenpaw!" Announced Duststar, his chest puffing out with pride as meows of congratulations rose from the clearing. "That is all I have to report this moon."

A ginger tabby tom with white paws and blue eyes raised his tail for silence before speaking. "DawnClan is suffering the loss of our beloved elder, Milkstripe." He meowed, his voice hollow. "She passed away in her sleep due to old age."

"She will be missed by every cat, Clearstar." Meowed Applestar, resting his tail across the leader's shoulders. "Milkstripe was like a mentor to all the Clans."

A tortoiseshell she-cat rose to her paws, her eyes dull with grief for the elder. "My mother was the best cat that ever served DawnClan." She meowed sadly, looking up to the stars. "If I can even be half of the warrior and mother she was, I would consider it a success."

"Well said, Maplewhisker." Meowed Thorntail, his eyes flashing to the she-cat. "Milkstripe was a great cat, she will be missed dearly." He bowed his head, as did Maplewhisker when she sat back down.

Clearstar cleared his throat and went on. "We also have three new apprentices who are not present at tonight's Gathering. However, congratulations Goldenpaw, Shadepaw, and Pebblepaw!"

While the cats around Nightpaw were cheering for the absent apprentices, Thorntail leaned towards her. "They're Thornbite's kits," he whispered.

"Thornbite has kits?" She whispered back, in shock. *I never knew a cat with such an attitude could ever attract a tom.* She admitted.

"That is all I have to report," Clearstar looked at Snowstar and dipped his head. "You can go if you want, Snowstar."

Snowstar didn't need to be told twice as she stepped up, eyes blazing. "GlacierClan has lost a noble warrior in Finchheart at the paws of OakClan!" She hissed, glaring at Applestar.

Growling and protests echoed in the clearing, Nightpaw among them. She was furious beyond her control. *Snowstar's Clan was stealing prey*! She wanted to screech.

"The death of your warrior was on your own paws, Snowstar!" Shouted Scorchtail, eyes blazing.

"Stealing prey means you're breaking the Warrior Code!" Added a furious Bravebranch.

Snowstar hissed at the warriors, claws unsheathing. "Because of OakClan's merciless ways, we lost a great warrior who should've lived for seasons longer."

Applestar rose to his paws, eyes cool with a masked fury. "Snowstar, I can assure you that Finchheart's death was accidental and whoever killed him feels deep regret."

Snowstar glared at the OakClan leader and snarled. "They better, or there will be more dead cats who join Finchheart." She threatened.

Nightpaw looked at Applestar, surprised to not see him retorting. *Maybe he wants to look calm for the other leaders*. She thought.

"If that is all, Snowstar, I would like to begin my report." He meowed and Nightpaw saw pleasure in seeing the she-cat sit down. "OakClan is doing well, despite the loss of one of our most beloved warriors. Blizzardflake has joined StarClan and Russetbriar and her kits are coping well."

Silence clung to the clearing, making Nightpaw rather uncomfortable. *I hate needless silence.* She thought, looking expectantly at her leader.

"However, Ivyheart announced that she is expecting Halfthroat's kits and will be moving into the nursery shortly." Applestar finished and looked at the other leaders, even Snowstar. "I believe that is the conclusion of this moon's Gathering. Please go to your respective

leaders and leave."

At his word, Applestar leaped down from his branch and whisked his tail in a circle. "OakClan, we're leaving!" He called and Nightpaw rose to her paws.

"I'll see you around, Nightpaw." Meowed Robinfire, smiling at the apprentice. "See you next Gathering!"

"You too, Robinfire!" She called, padding away to join her Clanmates. Halfthroat bounded to her side, his eyes intense.

"How was your first Gathering?" He asked, looking at her. "Did you say any of our secrets?"

Nightpaw shook her head. "It was okay, I met some nice DawnClan cats. Thorntail, Thornbite, and Robinfire seemed pretty cool."

Halfthroat tensed beside her and she glanced at him. "I didn't say anything I shouldn't have," she added.

"Good," was all her mentor said before bounding away to Ivyheart. *Will I ever have a mate or kits?* She wondered and pushed the thought away with a gag. Right now, her main priority was getting to her nest to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

"Nightpaw, wake up." A harsh mew made Nightpaw's head jerk up from her paws and she blinked away sleep. Above her, Halfthroat stood over her, his eyes unreadable. "Be quiet and let's get out of the camp."

"Where?" She asked quietly, aware of her siblings and the other apprentices in the den. "Where are we going?"

Halfthroat didn't answer as he silently padded out of the den. Nightpaw contained a growl of annoyance and she followed quietly. The moon hang lazily over her head, bathing her pelt in moonlight.

The camp was deathly quiet, not even Russetbriar's kits would be playing at this time of night. Shimmergaze and Mistyflake were guarding the camp so Halfthroat led Nightpaw out of the camp using the dirtplace tunnel.

Nightpaw squeezed her way through the tunnel, hissing slightly as thorns scratched her ear and flanks. *Where in the world are we going*? She asked silently but followed her mentor without a word.

Halfthroat seemed at ease as they neared a part of the territory Nightpaw had never seen before. In front of them, Nightpaw saw movement and she unsheathed her claws, alert.

Halfthroat saw her stance and waved his tail dismissively. "Relax," he meowed. "It's just Songpaw being Songpaw." *Songpaw's here*? Nightpaw winced and nodded, reluctantly sheathing her claws.

As they neared where Songpaw was, Nightpaw made out many other shapes. Something about the strong build of the other cats made one thing clear to Nightpaw.

"Who is this, Halfthroat?" Demanded Nightflower, GlacierClan's deputy. "We don't need kits to join us."

Nightpaw unsheathed her claws, hissing. "I'm not a kit!" She retorted. "I'm an apprentice, *Halfthroat's* apprentice!"

"Calm down, apprentice," purred a voice from behind Nightpaw. She turned around, hostility pricking her pelt. A dark ginger tom with bright yellow eyes looked at her. "Nightflower won't hurt you."

The deputy hissed, making the tom smirk. "See what I mean?" He meowed to Nightpaw, who nodded nervously.

"Rowantail," growled Halfthroat. He turned to the other cats, his eyes glinting. "Tonight is the half-moon, correct?" He asked Nightflower, who nodded. "The medicine cats and medicine cat apprentices are at the Moonpool."

"Which is important why?" Asked Songpaw, cutting Halfthroat off. "Why are is the half-moon meeting so important to us?"

Nightpaw watched as Halfthroat cuffed Songpaw over the ear with a massive paw, claws unsheathed. Songpaw let out a growl of pain and ducked down, glaring at the tom as blood trickled down his ear from the nick.

"Do *not* interrupt me, Songpaw." Halfthroat meowed, glaring at Nightpaw's brother. "Anyway, how many medicine cats would be at the meeting this time?"

A white and gray speckled she-cat spoke. "Six," she answered. "All of them are going. I saw them before I made it here."

Halfthroat was quiet for a moment before he spoke. "Who else joined you this quarter-moon, Echospeck?" He asked the speckled she-cat.

Echospeck lifted her tail and three other cats, unfamiliar to Nightpaw came out of the shadows. *StarClan's kits*! She thought.

Halfthroat looked pleased and flicked his tail to two cats. One of them was a gray and white tom with gleaming green eyes and the other was a ginger tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

"So nice that there are more of us this time," purred the tom as he sat down. "Squirrelsplash and I almost couldn't make it."

Squirrelsplash nodded, her eyes flashing. "We almost got caught sneaking out by Blackdust and Eeltail." She meowed, claws unsheathing.

Halfthroat flicked his tail and looked at the sky, seeing the stars shining coldly over his broad, scarred head. "Let's go," he meowed gruffly and looked around. "We need to get to the Moonpool before the medicine cats wake up and head back to their camps."

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Halfthroat led the way as Nightpaw, Songpaw, Squirrelsplash, Thistlespirit, Echospeck, Tumblewatcher, Poppybee, Rowantail, and Nightflower silently stalked up the hill leading to the Moonpool.

With Songpaw next to her, Nightpaw felt uncomfortable. She and her brother never got along since the day she was born. *Why does he hate me so much*? She wondered then shook her head, a new emotion boiling in her belly and she unsheathed her claws. *I'll prove to Songpaw that I'm not a kit*!

Halfthroat stopped and Nightpaw nearly crashed into him but she stopped herself just in time. "They're sleeping," he whispered, his voice soft and quiet. "Surround them and wait for my signal."

Without missing a beat, Nightpaw crouched down and headed around the starry pool. She made out the shapes of every medicine cat and focused on one cat. Blackheart.

The tom was curled up beside the Moonpool, not leaning over the

small edge with his muzzle a whisker away. *What's his problem*? Nightpaw asked herself but she blinked, getting into the hunting crouch a few mouse-lengths away from the tom.

She looked around and saw Songpaw crouched behind Mottlesong, his eyes gleaming with excitement and longing. To her left, Rowantail and Echospeck were crouched around Tanglewatcher and Timberskip. Halfthroat and Thistlespirit were to the left and right of Swiftflake, watching his flanks rise and fall. Tumblewatcher, Poppybee, and Nightflower were at the entrance of the cave, their eyes dark.

Poppybee split away from the others and stalked towards Flamehawk and got in her position, looking to Halfthroat.

"Attack!" Yowled the warrior and he and Thistlespirit charged forward. Halfthroat leaped onto Timberskip and Thistlespirit targetted Tanglewatcher.

As the Moonpool's cave filled with yowls of pain and anger as the medicine cats woke, Nightpaw flung herself at Blackheart, claws unsheathed.

The medicine cat apprentice let out a hiss and swung at her ears but he missed. Nightpaw lashed out a paw and caught his shoulder before darting away.

Blackheart leaped, crashing down on Nightpaw with such force, her head connected with the ground and she yelped. Underneath the tom, Nightpaw looked up to see the pain in Blackheart's eyes.

"Why, daughter?" He whispered, confusing Nightpaw. Gritting her teeth together, Nightpaw flew up at the tom and pinned him to the ground and slashed at his chest.

Blood sprayed Nightpaw's face, blinding her as her paws flailed. *Just kill him*! Her head screeched and Nightpaw raised her paw to end Blackheart's life but stopped, seeing a strange calm in his eyes.

"What did you mean when you called me your daughter?" She asked, suddenly reluctant to kill the tom. He kept quiet, annoying

Nightpaw. "Answer me!"

Blackheart raised his chin to her ear and Nightpaw froze. "You," he rasped, "are no daughter of mine." Nightpaw shoved the medicine cat apprentice to the stone floor and raked her claws across his neck.

Blackheart let out a painful screech that made Nightpaw flinch but she watched the light drain from his yellow eyes. Her paw was dripping with his blood, making her sick. *I just killed my Clan's medicine cat.*

"Useless medicine cat!" Songpaw's yowl made Nightpaw look up to see a bloodbath. Flamehawk was barely clinging to life as Poppybee sank her teeth into his shoulder and threw him to the ground.

Songpaw was standing over the body of Mottlesong and Nightpaw saw the pride in his blazing eyes as they met gazes. *Mottlesong was so nice to me, she didn't deserve to die.*

Rowantail had Tanglewatcher pinned to the floor and dove down, biting the tom's neck as he shrieked in pain. Nightpaw couldn't bear to watch another cat lose their life.

Halfthroat padded from the body of Swiftflake and looked around, his gaze lingering on Nightpaw the longest. "Well done," he meowed and lashed his tail back and forth. "Let's leave the bodies here and go before any cat knows we're gone."

Nightpaw looked down at Blackheart's sightless gaze, her heart hollow and tight. *What have I done*? She thought as she tore her eyes away from the dead medicine cat. *I did this to prove to Halfthroat that I can keep the oath.*

Chapter Fourteen

"What do we do?" Wailed Toadpad as he gazed at the dead bodies of Mottlesong and Blackheart. "We have no medicine cats!"

Tawnywillow raised her head, her eyes glimmering with worry. "What if one of us gets sick or injured?" She asked, tail flicking.

It was sunhigh and Nightpaw was sharing a vole with Reedpaw. The cats who had been chosen by Applestar to find Mottlesong and Blackheart returned with their bodies and the horrible news that almost every medicine cat had been brutally slain.

"A group of cats attacked defenseless medicine cats while they were speaking with StarClan." Scorchtail had reported when her, Marigoldscar, Mistyflake, and Frostgaze returned from the Moonpool.

Nightpaw sat next to her brother, seeing Halfthroat sliding out of the nursery with a blank look on his face. *He's trying not to look suspicious.* She thought as her mentor padded towards her and Reedpaw.

"Nightpaw," meowed Halfthroat as he neared and Nightpaw rose to her black paws. "Let's go battle training." As Nightpaw began to nod, Frostgaze padded towards them.

"I just got told by Spiderstem to take all the apprentices out hunting," she meowed to Halfthroat, who tensed. "I'll fetch Rosespring and Bravebranch." She paused, looking at Nightpaw. "Will you get Aspenpaw, Dawnpaw, and Songpaw?"

Nightpaw looked to her mentor and nodded nervously to Frostgaze. She had never been taught how to hunt by Halfthroat. It had always been battle training from sunrise to sunset.

As Nightpaw padded away to the apprentice den, a butterfly flew

by her nose and she unsheathed her claws on instinct, watching as it did circles in the air.

Nightpaw watched the butterfly for a moment before leaping at it and swatting it out of the air, crushing it with a paw. Looking up from the dead insect, Nightpaw poked her head into the apprentice's den.

"Aspenpaw? Dawnpaw? Songpaw?" She called, looking around for the other apprentices. Aspenpaw's shape let out a cough and sniffled, making Nightpaw perk in alarm. "Aspenpaw, are you alright?"

She padded towards her denmate, worried. "Are you sick?" She asked, tail twitching anxiously. Nightpaw hesitantly took another few steps towards Aspenpaw, her pelt prickling. "Aspenpaw...?"

Her denmate groaned and rolled over, her eyes screwed shut and digging claws into the ground. Nightpaw turned tail and raced out of the den, yowling. "Aspenpaw's sick! Aspenpaw's sick!"

Marigoldscar, Aspenpaw's mother, let out a shriek and raced towards Nightpaw, eyes wide and worried. "Is she okay?" She asked, looking at Nightpaw with wide, distressed eyes.

Nightpaw felt every cat's eyes on her pelt and she trembled. "I-I don't know," she mumbled, looking at her paws.

Marigoldscar sprinted past the she-cat and disappeared into the apprentice den, a wail sounding from inside. As Nightpaw looked up to meet the gazes of her Clanmates, she saw Bravebranch pacing the clearing along with Honeypaw and Littlepaw.

Will Aspenpaw be okay without Mottlesong and Blackheart? She fretted, looking at Halfthroat. *After all, if she dies, her death would be on my paws.*

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"When faced with a topic like death," began Halfthroat in his usual masked expression as he spoke. "You need to block out any emotion that may lead to weakness."

Nightpaw nodded, Songpaw beside her. Aspenpaw was moved to Mottlesong and Blackheart's old den and Nightpaw wouldn't let her fears for the apprentice affect her on the outside.

"If you do," Halfthroat went on without missing a beat. "It gives your Clanmates the upper-paw and makes you look weak and exposed to sensitive occurrences."

Nightpaw unsheathed her claws, tail flicking. She would *never* make herself look weak in front of her Clanmates. *Especially in front of Applestar.* She added silently.

If she wanted to become a warrior in the eyes of her leader, she had to be as strong as she could. *And losing a couple of cats wouldn't hurt any cat.* A dark part of her mind hissed.

Halfthroat waved his tail towards the forest. "Follow me and keep quiet, unless you want to get caught." He meowed and turned away, heading deeper into the forest.

Nightpaw hurried after him, Songpaw jogging at her side. "I wonder what we'll be doing," she meowed, looking at her brother.

Songpaw didn't glance in her direction as he bounded after Halfthroat. "Maybe we're teaching a fox or badger not to mess with us." He meowed.

Nightpaw shrugged, picking up the pace as she began to fall behind her mentor. They were nearing a white fence where Twoleg nests loomed on the other side.

She skidded to a stop next to Halfthroat, panting. "What are we doing at Twolegplace?" She asked, looking at her mentor in question.

Halfthroat twitched his ear, not looking at his apprentice as he answered. "We're going to snatch a kittypet and drag them to the river for today's lesson."

Nightpaw nodded, deciding against protesting and watched as Halfthroat leaped over the fence. As his tail disappeared over the

fence, he leaped swiftly back over in a heartbeat, a rather large kittypet in his jaws by the scruff.

As Halfthroat silently dragged the kittypet towards the nearby river, he threw it to the ground and unsheathed his claws, standing on its tail.

"If you try to escape," he threatened. "I will watch these two shred you to pieces and feed you to the foxes."

Nightpaw glared at the kittypet; a brown and white tabby she-cat with the sky blue eyes. *Pathetic,* a voice hissed in her ear. *Slay her without mercy, Nightpaw.*

Halfthroat turned to the two apprentices, his eyes sparkling. "Nightpaw, you will be the one battle training on this kittypet." He meowed and Nightpaw nodded.

Songpaw looked enraged, his pelt bristling. "Why don't I get to fight?" He demanded.

Halfthroat fixed him with a glare before shooting forward and slashing the tom's cheek. Nightpaw held a gasp as her brother staggered and glared at Halfthroat, anger, and loathing in his amber eyes.

"Go check around the area and get us something to eat, apprentice," Halfthroat ordered and turned away before Songpaw could protest.

As he faced Nightpaw and the kittypet, he unsheathed his claws. "Nightpaw, you take the she-cat down and try to beat her in a battle." He meowed. "Use the skills I have taught you and if you end up killing this kittypet, I will consider telling Applestar to give you your warrior name."

Hope flared inside Nightpaw, along with shock and determination to prove herself. *I've been an apprentice for a moon and a half and Halfthroat considers my warrior name!* With this new thought in her mind, Nightpaw flung herself at the kittypet, snarling.

The plump she-cat let out a wail of terror and crouched down to the ground, eyes huge with terror. Nightpaw clashed with the she-cat

with a loud hiss, claws digging into her soft, fluffy fur.

The kittypet flailed her paws feebly, a small attempt to defend herself. Nightpaw jerked her head back as her muzzle was hit with a soft paw. Baring her teeth, Nightpaw dove down and went for her neck.

Instead of meeting soft flesh, Nightpaw's teeth met something tough and stretchy. *What in StarClan?* She thought and pulled the strange thing between her teeth.

The kittypet underneath gasped, her eyes wide as her paws pushed Nightpaw more urgently. Nightpaw grinned, pulling harder and relishing every moment the she-cat gasped for air.

Nightpaw felt her claws dig into the chest of the kittypet and her screeches were like birdsong to her ears as she tugged at the Twoleg *thing* around her neck with a small bell dangling from it.

As Nightpaw pulled, a ripping sound made her look at the collar and it snapped in half with a *shrrrrrnk!* Nightpaw let out a yowl of surprise as she flew backward, hitting a tree and groaning as she opened her eyes.

Her vision was blurry as she opened her eyes. The kittypet was scrambling towards the river and Nightpaw unsheathed her claws, leaping towards her paws.

"Oh no, you don't!" She yowled, pelting after the she-cat. As she caught up with the kittypet, Nightpaw leaped onto her back and the two went into the water with a *splash!*

As her head went under the water's surface, Nightpaw began to panic. Her grip on the kittypet was weakening and her lungs screamed for the air she could not reach from beneath the water.

Beneath her, the kittypet looked up at Nightpaw with fear in her blue eyes. Her determination to kill the she-cat washed over her once more and she desperately pawed to get to the surface.

With a gasp, her head broke the water's surface and she took in a few large gulps of air. Seeing Halfthroat watching from the trees

made Nightpaw dive back under the water and search for the kittypet.

She was struggling to get to the surface and Nightpaw latched onto her fur like a tick. She scored a few slow blows to her sides and kicked up with her hind legs and they both gasped for air.

Nightpaw, while meeting Halfthroat's gaze, latched onto the kittypet and dragged her under the water. Sinking her teeth slowly into her hindleg, Nightpaw felt blood pour into her mouth.

As she dragged the kittypet down, Nightpaw's vision slowly began to darken and her lungs tightened but she refused to let go of the kittypet. *Halfthroat wants her dead, and that is how she will be.*

With a heave of effort, Nightpaw hovered above the kittypet and slid down to her neck, sinking her teeth into the soft flesh. Blood gushed from the wound and from Nightpaw's mouth and around them, the water turned a shade of red.

The kittypet's eyes widened and she began to paw at Nightpaw, who let go long enough to watch the terror and light fade from her eyes as the prey-look of death consumed her.

Grabbing the kittypet by the scruff, Nightpaw clawed her way towards the surface and broke through with a gasp. As she paddled for the shore, she flung the body of the kittypet in front of Halfthroat and coughed up mouthfuls of water.

"Very good, Nightpaw." He praised and Nightpaw looked hopefully up at him. "I will speak with Applestar about you becoming a warrior." Before she could speak, he went on. "However, you need to work on keeping your emotions hidden."

Nightpaw nodded, looking at her paws. Her claws were still unsheathed and she followed Halfthroat as they headed for the camp. Her claws remained unsheathed the entire way back.

Chapter Fifteen

"Nightpaw, do you promise to uphold the Warrior Code and to defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Applestar asked, looking down at Nightpaw as he spoke the words.

"I do," she answered boldly, pushing her weight onto her hind legs so she could hold her leader's gaze. All around her, Nightpaw could hear the soft whispering and muttering of her Clanmates.

"She's too young to become a warrior," murmured Iceleaf, who sat with Mistyflake and Rosespring.

"Back when I was an apprentice," Deerstripe was muttering to herself. "We became warriors when we were old enough to have kits."

Nightpaw flattened her ears to block out the sound of her Clanmates whispers, but when Applestar raised his head, they fell silent.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name." Applestar leaped down from the Tall Tree and loomed over Nightpaw. "Nightpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Nightshrike. StarClan honors your strength and skill and we welcome you as a full member of OakClan." When he finished speaking, he rested his chin on her head. As tradition, Nightshrike licked his shoulder and raised her head, gazing around at her Clanmates.

Voletuft was gazing at her with pride in her green eyes and Gorsewhisper was nodding approvingly to her. When Nightshrike looked at her former denmates, she tensed.

Dawnpaw had a look of envy in her eyes and Songpaw was glaring directly at Nightshrike. Honeypaw and Littlepaw were smiling from ear to ear at Nightshrike and so was Reedpaw, though, jealousy was clear in his eyes.

Her heart broke when she didn't see Aspenpaw, who had joined StarClan a few days ago when she had fallen ill. With no medicine cats, the Clan hadn't been able to keep her alive long enough to get stronger.

From the nursery, Ivyheart was gazing at her with a skeptical look in her green eyes. Her kits who were born a day ago were behind her, sleeping on top of each other.

Goldenkit was the biggest and the only tom in the litter of four. He had broad shoulders, a broad muzzle, and stripes that ended in sharp points.

Amberkit was smaller than her brother but not by much. She was ginger and white and she had broad shoulders, small hips, and small paws. Her spots were much softer than Goldenkit's stripes.

Applekit was different than her siblings. She was a dark ginger tabby with jagged stripes like her older brother. Like her mother, Applekit had smaller paws but a longer tail and large ears.

Snowkit was the odd one out of the other three kits. She was a light brown tabby, different than all of her siblings. Nightstrike never knew why Ivyheart thought of snow when she looked at her youngest daughter and she didn't care.

"There is one large ceremony that I have to perform," continued Applestar, snapping Nightshrike from her thoughts. She quickly ducked her head and headed for her mother and father to watch. "Swiftkit, Volekit, Pinekit, and Wrenkit come forward."

Nightshrike felt her mother and father straighten beside her but kept her gaze on Applestar. *They want to be mentors so bad, I can't understand why.* She thought, seeing Gorsewhisper's eyes glint.

Aspenpaw used to be his apprentice before she died, Nightshrike assumed that he felt grief during the ceremony. *Grief only shows weakness, and that is what you don't want.*

"Swiftkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Swiftpaw." Applestar meowed, nodding

to the tom. "Blueheart, you are a kind and patient warrior and I know you will pass on everything you know onto Swiftpaw."

Blueheart rose to her paws, her eyes shining eagerly as she padded towards Swiftpaw. They touched noses briefly and sat down, sitting up straight as Applestar went on.

"Volekit, from this moment on until you earned your warrior name, you will be known as Volepaw." The leader looked at the tom, tail flicking. "Redstripe, you are a strong and loyal warrior and I know you will pass on those traits onto Volepaw."

Redstripe nodded from his spot next to Shimmergaze and padded towards his apprentice, green eyes cool and calm as he touched noses with Volepaw.

"Pinekit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Pinepaw." The yellow tabby tom meowed. "Marigoldscar, you are a stern and skillful warrior and I know that you will train Pinepaw to be just that."

Marigoldscar smiled and padded towards her apprentice, her tail swishing behind her. They touched noses and Applestar called the last kit waiting.

"Wrenkit," something about the leader's tone made Nightshrike glance over at Halfthroat. Her former mentor was glaring at the leader with ambition and hatred flaring in his green eyes. "From this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Wrenpaw. Spiderstem, you trained Iceleaf to be the kind warrior she is and I know you will mimic your actions to mold Wrenpaw into what Iceleaf is now."

"You know I will do my best, Applestar." The deputy meowed curtly, his shoulders tense as he touched noses with his new apprentice and looked up at Applestar.

"Swiftpaw! Volepaw! Pinepaw! Wrenpaw!" Cheered the cats around Nightstrike and she felt hesitant to join in. *Is that what we do? Cheer until we lose our voices?*

Applestar raised his tail for silence and raised his head, eyes dark. "There is one more announcement I have to make," he meowed. "I am stepping down from being your leader and leaving the Clans forever to live as a loner with my mate, kits, and friends."

Nightshrike looked up at the leader in shock. *What?* She looked at her Clanmates, who looked just as shocked as she was. Even Halfthroat's eyes had been clouded with surprise. *Is that even allowed?*

A yowl of sadness came from the crowd and Nightshrike recognized Vixenpool's red and white pelt pushing through the throng of warriors and apprentices to get to Applestar.

Her eyes were pools of emotion, so much so that Nightshrike could only name a select few. Shock, hurt, pain, betrayal, hatred, and loss.

"Y-you're leaving us?!" Vixenpool trembled with rage and Nightshrike narrowed her eyes. "After all we've been through together, you're leaving with some *rogues*?"

Applestar flattened his ears. "They aren't just rogues, Vixenpool." He argued. "They are kind and noble and would do anything to protect me and my kits."

Redstripe leaped to his paws with a hiss and Nightshrike looked at the tom. He stalked towards his mother and glared at his father, claws digging into the ground with anger.

"What about me?" He spat, venom in his words and eyes. Applestar flinched but held his son's gaze. "I'm your kit, am I not? I am your flesh and blood and you betray me and my mother like we're crowfood!"

Applestar opened his mouth to defend himself but Vixenpool lashed out with a paw and slashed his cheek, spraying blood on the grass. She glared at her mate, and Nightshrike rose to her paws, ready to defend her Clanmate if Applestar attacked her.

The leader growled and glared at Vixenpool, though his eyes shone with pain and hurt rather than anger. "I'm doing this so I can

protect you." He rasped, raising his head.

"You're doing it for you," snapped Redstripe as he sized up his father, only a whisker shorter than Applestar. "You never cared for me or my mother, and evidence shows that you never will since you found another mate and had more kits."

Applestar said nothing as he turned to Spiderstem, who refused to meet his eyes. "My deputy," the tom meowed.

The tom raised his paw and glared at the leader. "Save it, Applestar." He growled and Nightshrike watched as surprise flashed across Applestar's eyes. "I don't want to hear another word from you ever again."

Without another word to the tom, Spiderstem shoved passed him and leaped onto the first branch of the Tall Tree and climbed up until he reached the third, where he glared down at Applestar.

"I, Spiderstem, deputy of OakClan hereby sentence Applestar, the now-former leader of OakClan into exile." Spiderstem meowed, tail lashing. "If any of my cats find you or your friends on my territory, they have my permission to kill you."

Applestar bowed his head, possibly in shame or guilt. "From this moment on, I will no longer be known as Applestar." He declared, raising his head to look at every cat, but refused to meet the furious eyes of his mate and son. "My name will be Apple if that's alright with you."

A snarl came from the throat of Redstripe and he got into his father's face, teeth bared. "I don't care what your name is," he hissed. "Whatever name you bare, I will not care any less when I flay you alive."

Apple looked at his son, eyes lit with sadness. "I'm sorry, son." Was all he said before he glanced at Vixenpool and turned away, heading for the camp entrance.

Nightshrike found herself padding after him and called after him. "Apple!" She called without thinking.

Her former leader stopped, looking over his shoulder. "Nightshrike," he meowed, sounding defeated. "Are you going to chase me out of my own camp?" Apple asked dryly.

Nightshrike shook her head, her tail raised. "I'm more loyal than that," she replied, her chin raised. "What was your warrior name, Apple?"

The tabby tom looked surprised and from the whispers around her, she could tell her Clanmates were just as surprised. "Applefoot, that was my name." He rasped.

"What caused you to stray from everything you knew?" She pressed, standing her ground. "Why distance yourself from your family, friends, Clan, and the Warrior Code?"

Apple studied her and Nightshrike held his gaze firmly, power rising in her body. "Because there are more freedoms outside Clan borders than in, Nightshrike." The tom meowed and flicked his tail, looking away. "Goodbye," was all he said as he bounded away.

Nightshrike watched him go, her eyes trained on his fleeing yellow tabby pelt. *Is that true?* She thought, considering his words. *I know so much more lies beyond the horizon, but is it worth giving up your position of leader and your family for it?*

Chapter Sixteen

Nightshrike raised her head, her eyes adjusting to the light pouring into the warriors' den. She slowly rose to her paws and stretched, relishing how her muscles stretched.

With a yawn, she padded out of the den and looked around, spotting Spiderstar watching the Clan from the Tall Tree. Two days passed since Applestar's exile and Spiderstar had been overshadowed with the former leader's betrayal.

Nightshrike could see in his eyes that he didn't want to become Applestar, who now was named Apple. *Who would want to be?* With a shudder, she looked to the new deputy, Iceleaf.

She was a good choice for a deputy, Nightshrike knew the senior warrior would keep her Clanmates in check when it was needed. Iceleaf always sent out patrols at the right time and seemed to radiate an aura of power and respect wherever she went.

"Nightshrike," Halfthroat's mew made the new warrior turn to face her old mentor. "Come on, we need to go on a patrol with Songpaw, Reedpaw, and Toadpad." He meowed gruffly and Nightshrike nodded on instinct.

As she followed her former mentor towards the group of cats, Nightshrike couldn't help but glance at the nursery where Ivyheart's kits were playing tag.

I hardly remember being that small and innocent. Nightshrike thought, shaking her head as Applekit tripped over her paws and ran into Snowkit. *Maybe it's because of all the times I hit my head.*

"Nightshrike!" Growled Halfthroat, grabbing her from her thoughts

of being a kit. "Let's go before Iceleaf tells us to go." He meowed and stalked towards the camp entrance.

Nightshrike said nothing as she fell in step by Toadpad, who glanced at her uneasily. *You're so wary of me because I got my warrior name several moons early.* She thought, glaring at the black and white tom. *I want nothing to do with you and I never will.*

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Nightshrike lifted her head, looking blankly in front of her as Halfthroat raised his tail for the patrol to stop as they neared the GlacierClan border.

"Wait," growled her former mentor as he sniffed the air. "Get down and be quiet, they've crossed the border." Halfthroat crouched down, eyes narrowed as Nightshrike slid next to him. "Unsheathe your claws, Nightshrike and get ready for a bloody battle."

Nightshrike nodded tail flicking and unsheathing her claws silently. Her shoulders tensed as she saw a rather large GlacierClan patrol sniffing around.

"Remind me why Snowstar wants OakClan's forest, Swiftfang." Complained a dark gray tom. "It's too foresty for my liking."

Swiftfang growled in annoyance, tail lashing. "It isn't your choice whether or not Snowstar wants more territory, Cedarpaw."

Nightshrike inched forward, ignoring the glare she was getting from Halfthroat. She could see through the bushes in front of her that there was Swiftfang, Cedarpaw, Petalfire, Birdfoot, and Spiritpaw.

"Stop blabbering and keep walking, Cedarpaw." Meowed Petalfire, eyes lit with annoyance. "Spiritpaw, stop trying to sniff everything you see."

Nightshrike looked at Halfthroat, ear turning to him. She looked him in the eyes and looked at Songpaw, Reedpaw, and Toadpad. "Songpaw, go get back up from camp." She hissed, tail lashing.

"Toadpad, you're with me. Reedpaw, you're with Halfthroat."

Toadpad nodded and slid by Reedpaw and looked at Nightshrike. "What do we do?" He whispered and Nightshrike's ear twitched.

"Wait for my signal then we spring the ambush." She answered. "When Songpaw gets back, we shove them towards the border." Nightshrike looked over at Halfthroat and Reedpaw and nodded.

As Nightshrike and Toadpad got into position, she flicked her tail and leaped out of the bushes with a snarl. "Attack!" She crashed into Birdfoot, bowling her off her paws and pinning her to the ground.

Toadpad let out a growl and charged at Petalfire, who hissed and pounced on his back easily. Nightshrike hissed, slashing her claws at Birdfoot's ear and feeling the flesh tear satisfyingly.

The warrior hissed in pain and kicked her off, dealing a blow to Nightshrike's cheek. The black she-cat glared up at the GlacierClan warrior, preparing to leap at her again.

Claws scored against her flank and Nightshrike let out a snarl of pain and fury as she whirled around and lashed out blindly with a paw. Her claws sliced through the fur and flesh of her second attacker and she recognized Spiritpaw.

"Leave her alone, you mange-pelt!" The apprentice hissed and leaped onto Nightshrike's back and began to claw at her shoulders.

Nightshrike yowled in pain and turned her head and sank her teeth into Spiritpaw's leg. She tossed the apprentice off her back and leaped for Birdfoot, paws outstretched.

A flash of black fur slammed into her side and Nightshrike gasped for air as she hit the forest floor on her side. Coughing, she staggered to her paws and faced her opponents.

"Nightshrike!" The yowl from Reedpaw made all three cats turn their heads just in time for them to witness Reedpaw crashing into Spiritpaw, hissing. "Get away from her!"

"You need an apprentice to save your tail, Nightshrike?" Taunted

Birdfoot, who glared at Nightshrike. "You're no more than one yourself."

Nightshrike bared her teeth, pain flaring in her back where Spiritpaw's claws had dug in. "I was given my warrior name early," she spat back.

Birdfoot sneered. "You won't take on a *true* warrior, Night*paw*." She charged at Nightshrike, who braced herself to take the full-grown she-cat's weight.

A yowl from behind Nightshrike and a sudden gasp told her that Songpaw's backup had arrived. Owlflight was grappling with Birdfoot and Honeypaw had joined Reedpaw.

Nightshrike looked around, seeing Cedarpaw locked in a fight with Littlepaw and Dawnpaw. Toadpad was struggling underneath Petalfire and Nightshrike let out a yowl and raced to aid her Clanmate.

Nightshrike collided with Petalfire and grappled with the she-cat, her claws digging into the enemy she-cat's shoulders. She slashed her claws across Petalfire's chest, blood spraying her face.

"Get off her, you flea-pelt!" The sound of Cedarpaw made Nightshrike turn her head. Teeth sank into her scruff and the apprentice pulled her away from his Clanmate. "Pick on someone your own size!"

"With pleasure," hissed Nightshrike. She ran at the apprentice and darted to the right, narrowly avoiding his claws and lashed out with a paw, catching him on the side.

Teeth sank into her tail and Nightshrike let out a yowl of pain. Kicking out with her hind leg, her paw collided with Cedarpaw's mouth and he jerked his head back, whimpering in pain.

"GlacierClan!" That was Birdfoot. "Retreat!" Nightshrike saw the gray and white warrior dragging Spiritpaw away by the scruff. She wasn't moving.

"And stay out!" Hissed Owlflight as they retreated.

"Or we'll do more than hurt you!" Added Flightclaw. He turned to his Clanmates. "Is everyone okay?"

Nightshrike nodded painfully, silently wishing she didn't kill Blackheart at the Moonpool. "I'm okay, but Reedpaw and Dawnpaw don't seem too good."

Reedpaw dragged himself out of a clump of bracken, blood splattered onto his pelt. "I'm okay," he croaked.

"So am I," Dawnpaw called weakly as she trailed after Reedpaw, blood leaving a trail. "Why did they want the territory so badly?" She rasped, looking at Toadpad.

"Snowstar wanted it, apparently." Growled Halfthroat as he helped Toadpad to his paws. "Let's go report this to Spiderstar, I'm sure he'd have a thing or two to say about this."

As they began to limp back to camp, Nightshrike looked to the left and flicked her tail. She saw a yellow tabby pelt with blue eyes. Nightshrike blinked and the cat retreated into the trees out of her line of sight. *I guess Applestar wasn't loyal to us in the first place. He just watched us almost get killed and didn't bother to help.*

Chapter Seventeen

Nightshrike limped next to Tawnywillow as they headed for the Gathering Hollow. Her wounds from the battle with GlacierClan stung like fury, but she refused to show it. *Weakness is strength to your opponent.* She reminded herself.

Spiderstar led them, Iceleaf next to him. The two were quietly talking, making Nightshrike quicken her pace to hear what they were saying.

"-ell them." Iceleaf was meowing, her voice urgent. "We have to warn them that he's out there."

"I don't think he's much of a threat," Spiderstar flicked his ear. "If he is, we will warn the Clans."

Iceleaf flattened her ears. "And if he joins one of the Clans?" She prompted, making Nightshrike narrow her eyes in suspicion. *What are you up to, Iceleaf?*

Spiderstar didn't look at her as he replied. "Then good for him." He meowed and pressed on, making Iceleaf huff in annoyance. Nightshrike watched as Iceleaf rolled her eyes and slowed her pace until she was silently walking with Nightshrike.

Nightshrike paid no attention to the deputy and slowed to a halt as Spiderstar raised his tail. "Let's go," he meowed and bounded down into the hollow that was filled to the brim with cats.

The stench of GlacierClan and DawnClan made Nightshrike sick but she forced the gag in her throat down. NightClan wasn't there yet so she looked around for cats to talk to.

Nightflower, Swiftfang, and Lionflight were speaking with some DawnClan warriors and Nightshrike steered clear from them. *I don't want to talk to someone I just fought with.*

Spotting Thorntail with a group of his Clanmates intrigued Nightshrike and she found herself padding towards the tom, tail high. Thorntail noticed her first and she felt warm as his eyes rested on her.

"Nightpaw!" He meowed warmly, twitching his tail next to him. "Why do you look so battered?"

"Thorntail!" Scolded a brown tabby she-cat Nightshrike had never seen before. "Be nice!"

"Sparrowsong!" Called a gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes and Nightshrike noticed she was Ashpaw. "Come here! Tawnypaw and Foxpaw are in an argument again."

Sparrowsong sighed in annoyance and rose to her paws, already scowling at the two apprentices by the time Nightshrike sat down in front of Thorntail.

"How've you been, Nightpaw?" Asked Thorntail, tail flicking over his paws as he gazed warmly at her.

"I'm doing good, Thorntail." She purred, feeling better now that he was speaking to her and her alone. "But my name is Nightshrike now, not Nightpaw."

Thorntail looked surprised. "You got your warrior name already?" He breathed, seemingly proud and shocked at the same time. "Congratulations!" He broke into a loud purr, making Nightshrike's paws tingle.

"Thanks," her cheeks flushed and she looked away. "How are the cats from the patrol?" She asked, looking up sheepishly at Thorntail.

The tom chuckled. "They're doing fine," he meowed. His eyes and tone turned serious, scaring Nightshrike. "But, Flamehawk was killed at the Moonpool last half-moon."

He sounded sad, making Nightshrike wince. *I know that because I was there. I was the one who killed Blackheart.* She wanted to tell the tom what she saw but held her tongue and instead, acted surprised. "Flamehawk's dead, too?" Nightshrike forced her eyes to widen

slightly.

Thorntail nodded sadly, his eyes misting. "Yeah," he meowed and Nightshrike felt her heart break in two. *Please don't be sad!* "Hazelhawk, Lionflight, and Creekfur found his body with the other medicine cats around the Moonpool. They had gone down fighting."

Nightshrike opened her mouth to reply when Snowstar yowled. "Cats of all Clans! Let the Gathering begin!" She looked at the other leaders on the tree, seeing Spiderstar, Snowstar, Clearstar, and Duststar.

"I shall begin," meowed Duststar. "Unfortunately, Swiftflake joined StarClan while at the Moonpool last half-moon." He looked around, making Nightshrike straighten.

Clearstar and the other leaders looked shocked and horrified. "Swiftflake is dead as well?" The DawnClan leader meowed. "Tanglewatcher died but we're lucky that Timberskip survived."

Snowstar and Spiderstar looked at each other in relief. "Clearstar," meowed Snowstar. "When Timberskip is fully recovered, is it alright if he trains a new apprentice for GlacierClan?"

"And OakClan?" Added Spiderstar, looking at Clearstar pleadingly. "If that's alright with you and Timberskip." He added quickly.

Clearstar purred, nodding. "What do you think, Timberskip?" The tom asked, looking over his shoulder. "Can you handle three apprentices at once?"

Nightshrike never noticed the brown tom in the crowd. *I was too busy talking to Thorntail to see him.* She scolded herself and looked at the leaders.

"Of course," the tom meowed with pain in his voice, though he looked thrilled. "Every Clan needs a medicine cat."

"Thank you, Timberskip." Purred Spiderstar, dipping his head to the tom. "OakClan will never forget this, I promise."

"Neither will GlacierClan," added Snowstar, nodding to her Clanmates. "We are in your debt."

"Nonsense," Timberskip shook his head. "It is what I feel is right, I do not need anything more than a pawful of apprentices who are hungry for knowledge and access to herbs."

"Done," meowed Spiderstar and Snowstar instantly. They looked confused and looked at each other, then purred in amusement. The cats below them cheered and laughed.

"Who will be willing to train under Timberskip from NightClan?" Called Duststar, looking at his Clanmates.

A brown tabby tom named Dusthawk rose to his paws, eyes shining. "I will, Duststar." He meowed boldly, looking over his shoulder at Timberskip. "That is if you want to train me."

Timberskip rose to his paws and padded towards the tom, touching noses with him. "Of course," he purred, making Nightshrike risk a glance at Thorntail. *Will I love someone?* She wondered.

Timberskip raised his voice and his head. "I will only train one apprentice at a time," he announced. "But when Dusthawk knows the basics of being a medicine cat, we will go to each Clan and train the apprentices together."

"Any cat from DawnClan?" Asked Clearstar, tail flicking. "This means a lot to us, by the way, Timberskip."

"I will!" A spotted gray tom with green eyes leaped to his paws eagerly. "I'll train to become a medicine cat!"

"Very well, Shellfur," Clearstar looked pleased and Nightshrike flicked her tail tip, paws shifting.

"What about GlacierClan?" Snowstar prompted, shifting her gaze from Timberskip to her Clanmates. "Any volunteers?"

Nightshrike tensed, looking at Thorntail. "Are you going to become a medicine cat?" She whispered.

The tom looked at her as if she grew another head. "Of course not!" He meowed, shaking his head. "I love my mate and my kits too much to give that up."

Nightshrike nodded, relieved and hurt. *He loves his mate and kits, not you.* Her mind taunted her and she shook her head to clear it.

Ravenwatcher rose to her paws and nodded without a word. *She's so strange, I don't understand why she would throw her life away to become a pathetic medicine cat.*

"And from OakClan?" Spiderstar meowed, making Nightshrike tense. *Who will give up their life to become a medicine cat?* To her surprise, Reedpaw stood up.

"I will," he meowed. "Since the battle, I can't focus on my apprentice duties and I don't much like fighting." He explained.

"Very well, Reedpaw," meowed Spiderstar. He didn't sound resentful or bitter, just calm and cool.

Thorntail turned to her, whispering in her ear. "Meet me here tomorrow night at moonhigh, alright?" She shuddered, feeling his breath roll down the back of her neck.

"Why?" She breathed, looking at him in surprise. His blue eyes captured her, making her feel weightless as he gazed at her intently. "What are we going to do?"

Thorntail smiled, making Nightshrike feel dazed. "You'll only find out if you show up," he purred and pulled away as the leaders leaped down from the tree. "I'll see you tomorrow night, right?"

Without thinking of the consequences, Nightshrike responded without missing a beat. "Yes," she meowed, sounding much calmer than she felt.

As Thorntail smiled once more at her and began to pad towards his Clanmates, Nightshrike stared after him. She wanted to curl in a ball and sleep the night and day away until it was moonhigh tomorrow.

I'll meet him tomorrow night, just to see what he wants. She thought. But as she turned to follow her Clanmates, the truth dawned on her. *I'm in love with Thorntail.* And for once, she didn't try to mask the smile that wormed its way onto her lips.

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning came slowly to Nightshrike, still eager to meet with Thorntail that night. *What will we do? It's almost Leafbare, so what if we get cold?* Her cheeks warmed at that question and she shook her head.

Rising begrudgingly to her paws, Nightshrike heaved herself out of the warrior's den, her paws still aching from the trek back to camp from the Gathering. *Last night was a great night for all the Clans, not just for me.*

As she looked around the clearing, she saw Goldenkit, Amberkit, and Snowkit surrounding Applekit. The she-kit's fur was fluffed out with fear and her eyes shone in terror.

Nightshrike's paws worked faster than her mind and she was suddenly halfway across the clearing towards the litter of kittens. Goldenkit was hissing at his sister.

"We don't want to play with you!" He hissed, glaring at Applekit. "You're named after a traitorous leader!"

"That's right!" Agreed Amberkit. "You don't fit in with us anymore!"

"But I did nothing wrong!" Wailed Applekit, eyes wide and fearful. "What did I do to you to deserve this?"

Snowkit sniffed. "Your name is what you did," the brown tabby kit flung out a paw and hit Applekit on the head.

"Hey!" Nightshrike shouted, startling all four kits. "That's enough!" She glared at the three bullies, her neck fur rising. *Applekit shouldn't have to go through what I went through as a kit.*

"N-Nightshrike!" Squeaked Snowkit, her eyes wide with fear. "W-we weren't doing anything, I swear!"

Nightshrike glared at the kit, tail lashing. "Go to your mother and

tell her what you did to your sister." She ordered, glaring at each of the kits. "I'll talk to Applekit alone, now go."

The three kits scattered in all different directions. Nightshrike shook her head and looked down at a scared Applekit, her heart softening slightly. "Are you okay?" She asked, sitting down next to the small kit.

Applekit nodded, though she trembled. "Y-yeah," she whispered. "Thanks, I think."

Nightshrike purred with amusement, wrapping her tail around the kit and pulling her closer. "Never let them get to you, Applekit." She meowed. "Applestar's betrayal and your name have no connection, no matter what your littermates say."

The kit nodded and Nightshrike rose to her paws and began to pad away, but Applekit's call stopped her. She turned her head to look at the kit in confusion.

"What was it like being a kit for you?" Applekit asked, head tilting. "Did you and your siblings get along?"

Nightshrike didn't respond right away, pulled into a memory of bitterness and hurt. She was in the nursery with Songkit, Dawnkit, Littlekit, Honeykit, Aspenkit, and Reedkit.

"Let's go inside and play hide-and-seek!" Nightkit squeaked, already bounding inside. She looked over her shoulder, seeing Reedkit following her with happy green eyes.

She didn't have the chance to look back when she slammed into someone, making the two cats toppling over each other. To her dread, she'd slammed right into Songkit.

The light tabby kit let out a yelp and crashed to the ground with Nightkit squishing him to the ground. "Get off me, you tick!" He growled, shoving the black-furred kit off.

Nightkit fell on her back with a gasp, looking fearfully up at Songkit as he towered over her. "I-I'm sorry!" She whimpered, scrambling away.

Songkit let out a hiss and sprang at Nightkit, sending her skidding in the dust. Claws sliced through her pelt and through her thin skin, making her cry out in pain.

Her older brother let out a snarl, slashing her face with his thorn-like claws. "Next time, you won't be so lucky." Songkit threatened and stalked away towards a snickering Dawnkit.

Nightkit watched him go, feeling numb. Tears sprang in her eyes but she forced them down as she, with Reedkit's help, got to her paws.

"I hate them," her brother spat, making Nightkit flinch at the amount of anger laced his tone. "When we become apprentices next moon, we'll show them not to mess with us!"

Nightshrike blinked and looked at Applekit. "Go to your mother, little one." She told her before turning away and trotting towards the fresh-kill pile.

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The moon hung over Nightshrike's head as she stalked through the dark forest. *Thorntail better be waiting for me. Otherwise, I'd claw his ears off.* Nightshrike held back a yawn as she neared the Gathering Hollow.

It was empty and Nightshrike let out a sigh. *I knew he wouldn't wait for me.* She thought bitterly as she turned away, padding away from the hollow.

"Nightshrike!" Called a cat from behind her and Nightshrike froze, her heart lifting. *Thorntail!* She whipped around, sprinting back to the hollow.

The tom was sitting in the center of the clearing, his eyes glowing with happiness. "I thought you wouldn't show up," he purred as Nightshrike reached him.

Nightshrike smiled widely at him, eyes gleaming. "Of course I would show up," she breathed, taking in the sight of the tom. "What are we doing here, anyway?"

Thorntail nudged her, eyes sparkling with amusement. "I wanted to share this beautiful night with someone I care about." He meowed, looking from Nightshrike to the starry sky.

Nightshrike's black fur warmed and she prodded Thorntail in the shoulder with a paw. "I'll race you to the base of the tallest tree." She meowed and took off without waiting for a response.

Thorntail laughed and charged after her. Nightshrike looked over her shoulder to see the tom catching up slowly. *Someone doesn't run that often.* She purred with amusement and ran faster.

Nightshrike looked over her shoulder again and didn't see Thorntail. Confused, she skidded to a stop and looked around. A yowl from above her made her look up just in time for Thorntail to land on her shoulders.

With a yelp, Nightshrike tumbled to the ground with Thorntail pinning her down. She looked up at him, seeing amusement in his blue eyes. "Very funny," she meowed.

"I know," came his breathless reply. "Why are you so fast?" Thorntail asked, smiling down at Nightshrike.

Nightshrike felt warm all over as Thorntail looked at her and she forced a reply. "I trained hard enough," she teased and batted his muzzle playfully. "Did the mighty Thorntail do the same when he was an apprentice?"

"Of course I did!" Thorntail snorted, stepping off Nightshrike and flopping down next to her. "I was the best apprentice in the Clan when I was in training."

Nightshrike purred and looked at him. "Of course you were," she meowed and looked up at the starry sky. "Do you believe in StarClan?" She asked, glancing at the tom.

Thorntail didn't look at her as he replied. "Of course I do," Nightshrike's heart sank and she looked away quickly. "StarClan is where every cat wants to go when we eventually die." He paused, his tone softening as he looked over at her. "Do you believe in

StarClan?"

Nightshrike didn't answer right away and chose to keep her gaze on the stars. *Do I believe in StarClan?* "Well, no," she murmured, glancing over at Thorntail sheepishly.

"It's okay to admit that," he meowed softly, shifting closer to her. "Not every cat needs to believe in StarClan, and it isn't enforced." Thorntail gazed into Nightshrike's eyes. "You are entitled to your own beliefs."

Nightshrike flattened her ears in embarrassment. "T-thanks, Thorntail." She mumbled. Her heart raced and she wondered if it would burst from her chest.

Thorntail shifted closer so their noses nearly touched. "Of course," he whispered, his eyes glimmering. He glanced away for a moment before locking eyes with her once more.

Nightshrike held her breath, afraid that if she so much as breathed, Thorntail would pull away. *Does he feel the same way about me?* Her heart fluttered at the thought and she felt her cheeks flush.

"Dawn will be here soon," Thorntail pulled away, much to Nightshrike's disappointment. "We'd better go back to our camps so they don't start to miss us." He joked but noticed Nightshrike's sad expression. "What's the matter?"

Nightshrike looked up at the tom, her heart starting to slowly return to normal. "Nothing," she lied and smiled at him. "I'll see you next half-moon, right?"

Thorntail smiled and nodded. "See you, Nightshrike!" He called as he bounded away. "I'll see you next time!"

Nightshrike chuckled and turned away, already missing the warmth of Thorntail's body next to her. As she padded away, she stopped and looked back. *Will I ever have a chance to have a family of my own with Halfthroat looming over my head?*

Chapter Nineteen

"By the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior names," Spiderstar announced. "From this moment on, you will be known as Littlewing, Honeyheart, Songscratch, and Dawnflame."

As Spiderstar rested his muzzle on the new warrior's heads, the Clan began to chant their names in harmony and unison.

"Littlewing! Honeyheart! Songscratch! Dawnflame!"

Nightshrike found herself hesitating to join in the cheering. Even though they were for her siblings, she didn't feel the need to cheer. *Especially for Songscratch.*

Nightshrike looked over at the medicine cat den, where Reedpaw watched without cheering. She saw sadness and envy in his eyes and Nightshrike frowned. *I thought he* wanted *to become a medicine cat apprentice.* She thought.

Beside the apprentice sat Timberskip and Dusthawk. They weren't cheering either, just sitting and watching. Eventually, the cheering died down and Spiderstar began to speak.

"One more ceremony before I dismiss this meeting," he meowed and flicked his tail at Ivyheart's kits, who were lined up in a row. "Come forward you four."

Goldenkit leaped to his paws and pranced forward, followed by his sisters. Nightshrike almost felt bad for the tom, being crowded by three sisters and being the only tom. However, he didn't look effected and Nightshrike shrugged.

"Goldenkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Goldenpaw." The Clan seemed to hold their breath as Spiderstar picked Goldenpaw's mentor. "Nightshrike," *What?* "You are a fantastic fighter and good hunter and I trust that you will pass on those traits onto Goldenpaw."

I've never hunted in my life! She wanted to screech but instead, she silently rose to her paws and padded towards her new apprentice. *I've been a warrior for a moon and I already have my first apprentice?*

Goldenpaw beamed at her, making Nightshrike's nerves ease slightly. *He looks ready to learn, that's good.* She thought as she and Goldenpaw touched noses.

Nightshrike's paws tingled with excitement as she and her new apprentice sat down next to each other. "Ready to start training?" She whispered to the golden tom.

"I hope you like to fight and not hunt," Goldenpaw meowed boldly, surprising Nightshrike.

"We have more in common than I thought, Goldenpaw." Nightshrike purred and looked from her apprentice to the ceremony.

"Vixenpool, I know you will pass on those traits onto Amberpaw." Spiderstar was meowing. As Vixenpool touched noses with Amberpaw and sat down, Nightshrike saw resentment in the former queen's eyes.

She doesn't like Amberpaw, possibly because her sister reminds her of Applestar. Nightshrike guessed. *Shame, Applestar was an okay leader.*

"Applekit, from this moment forward until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Applepaw." Nightshrike heard hesitance in his tone and she looked at Goldenpaw. "Primrosefur, you are a skilled and kind warrior and I know that you will pass on those traits onto Applepaw."

The she-cat rose to her paws, eyes glinting. She looked proud to have Applepaw to be her apprentice and Nightshrike looked over at the apprentice, who looked terrified. As they settled down, Spiderstar went on.

"Snowkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Snowpaw." Spiderstar looked around. "Scorchtail, you will mentor Snowpaw. You are a fierce and noble warrior and I know you will train this apprentice to be just that."

"Goldenpaw! Amberpaw! Applepaw! Snowpaw!" Cheered the cats around Nightshrike and she nodded to the other three apprentices and their mentors.

As the meeting ended, Voletuft and Gorsewhisper trotted up to her and Goldenpaw, their eyes warm and proud. *At least they're proud of me.*

"Congratulations, Nightshrike." Purred her mother, looking warmly at Goldenpaw. "You deserve your first apprentice."

"I'm a bit young to have an apprentice," she reminded her. "But thanks, Voletuft."

Gorsewhisper looked at Nightshrike. "We have something to tell you, Nightshrike." The black she-cat tensed and looked at her apprentice.

"Why don't you go catch up with your littermates? I'll only be a second, Goldenpaw." She meowed and turned back to her parents once her apprentice had gone. "What's the matter?"

Voletuft broke into a loud purr. "We're expecting kits!" She meowed, looking at Gorsewhisper lovingly. "You're going to be a big sister!"

Nightshrike stared at her mother and father in shock. "W-what?" She stuttered. *More kits? Aren't I and my older siblings enough for you?* "T-that's great, Voletuft."

Gorsewhisper looked over his shoulder where Iceleaf was waving her paw. "Got to go," he meowed and licked Voletuft's cheek. "I'll share some prey with you when I get back!" He called as he bounded away.

Voletuft purred with amusement and turned to Nightshrike. "Are you-" she didn't get time to finish as Nightshrike turned away from her mother.

"I have to show Goldenpaw the territory, Voletuft." She meowed rudely. "I'll see you later." Without another word, she padded towards Goldenpaw and jerked her muzzle.

"See you later, Amberpaw!" Goldenpaw called to his sister as he trotted after his mentor. "What are we doing? Don't tell me we're going to learn how to hunt and tour the territory." He complained.

Nightshrike flicked her tail over his ear, scowling. "Let's tour the territory and then we can start training." She meowed sternly. After seeing his expression, she added. "And don't give me attitude, or you will be pulling ticks and collecting herbs."

Goldenpaw fell silent and glared at his mentor, who cuffed him over the ears in response. "What was that for?" He hissed and Nightshrike cuffed him once more.

"Do not question me, Golden*kit*." Nightshrike snapped and saw anger flaring in his eyes. "Behave and you might skip the tour and we can start with battle training." That seemed to pique his interest as Goldenpaw fell silent and padded next to Nightshrike.

They padded alongside each other in a tense silence, one Nightshrike broke with her thoughts. *Halfthroat would probably want to know where we're going.* She shook her head, making Goldenpaw glance her direction. *He's not my mentor anymore, and yet, I know he has plans for Goldenpaw by the way his eyes gleam when he looks at my apprentice.*

"So," Goldenpaw looked at her as she broke the silence. "Have your eyes on any she-cats yet?" Her tone was light-hearted, but she was serious. *Because you have your eyes on Thorntail.* Her taunting thought accused her.

Her apprentice shrugged his broad shoulders, eyes flashing. "I don't know," he meowed. "Wrenpaw is pretty nice and Dawnflame is really cool, I guess."

Nighshrike held back a snort. *Does he think he can just snob his way into getting his warrior name when he's been an apprentice for a few moments?*

Goldenpaw looked over his shoulder and flicked his tail. "Where are we going?" He asked, sounding confused.

Nightshrike blinked, realizing they had reached the stream that separated GlacierClan's territory from OakClan's territory. "We're seeing the Clan's border we have the most trouble with." She meowed quickly.

Her apprentice blinked. "This is GlacierClan's border?" He sniffed. "Why aren't there any patrols marking it?"

"Because they're too busy sniffing our borders to mark it," Nightshrike grunted and steered her apprentice away from the border. "You lead the way back to camp," she meowed. Seeing his expression, she added. "You need to memorize where the camp is when you get in a battle and need help."

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"Nightshrike!" Called Dawnflame as she trotted over to her and Goldenpaw as they returned to camp. Nightshrike looked at Goldenpaw and nudged him towards the apprentice den before looking at her sister.

"What, Dawnflame?" She asked, surprised and annoyed at the cheeriness in her sister's mew. *What's got her all excited enough to talk to me? We haven't talked in moons and now she wants to be friends?*

Dawnflame beamed at Nightshrike, who frowned. "Didn't you hear?" She asked. "Songscratch and Russetbriar are mates!"

Nightshrike nearly gagged. *My brother has a mate? Russetbriar is so much older than him!* "What?" She meowed, in shock.

Her sister nodded vigorously. "I know!" She meowed and flicked her tail happily. "Songscratch told me this morning that he and Russetbriar are mates now."

"How come Russetbriar is mates with a cat who is many moons younger than her?" Nightshrike demanded, tail lashing. *Ever since Blizzardflake's death, Russetbriar seemed to not want another mate. Especially a young cat like Songscratch.*

Dawnflame shrugged. "I don't know, but aren't you happy that she's

at peace with Blizzardflake's death? She can move on and possibly have kits with Songscratch." She paused, narrowing her eyes.

Nightshrike didn't answer as she pushed passed her sister and looked around the camp. "Where's Halfthroat?" She asked, tail twitching as she scanned the camp for her former mentor.

Dawnflame growled in annoyance and glared at Nightshrike. "He's in the nursery with Ivyheart." She meowed. "I'm going to find Mistyflake and tell her about Songscratch and Russetbriar." Turning away with a sniff, Dawnflame stalked away from Nightshrike.

As her sister left, Nightshrike lashed her tail. *Why is Ivyheart in the nursery still? Her kits are now apprentices and she can return back to her warrior duties.* With a growl of irritation, Nightshrike stalked towards the nursery.

Passing in front of her, Rosespring and Vixenpool were discussing apprentice training and hunting lessons. Nightshrike rolled her eyes and scoffed. *Rosespring doesn't even* have *an apprentice.*

Scoffing after the she-cats left, Nightshrike padded into the nursery but stopped. Her ears twitched towards the sound of voices. *What in the name of StarClan is going on?* She wondered and inched closer.

"What do you mean, you don't want to have more kits?" That was Halfthroat's angered hiss. Nightshrike imagined his tail lashing side to side like a snake about to strike its prey.

Ivyheart let out a growl and Nightshrike flattened her ears. "We already have four fine apprentices, Halfthroat." She retorted. "Isn't that enough for you?"

Halfthroat let out a snarl and Nightshrike caught a glimpse of Ivyheart taking a small step back, eyes flashing uncertainly. "Goldenpaw, Amberpaw, Applepaw, and Snowpaw aren't enough for the Clan." He pressed, taking a couple of steps towards Ivyheart. "As warriors, we need to provide the Clan with more kits and apprentices that will soon become warriors."

Nightshrike's throat tightened as Halfthroat cornered Ivyheart to the

nursery wall and unsheathed her claws. *Will Halfthroat really force his mate to have more kits?*

Without wanting to watch more, Nightshrike pushed her way away from the nursery and headed for the warriors' den. Her tail was slithering behind her, her eyes dark as she entered the den.

Chapter Twenty

Nightshrike bit into her mouse, her belly full with nothing. She forced down a bite and went for another, forcing herself to chew, swallow, and repeat. She wasn't hungry at all, but she forced herself to eat.

Once her mouse was gone, she rose to her paws and padded towards the elders' den. Goldenpaw and Snowpaw were tasked with changing the bedding while Amberpaw and Applepaw went hunting.

Some hunting practice couldn't hurt Goldenpaw. She thought as she stretched and yawned. *After all, we can't focus only on fighting.* Shaking out her pelt, Nightshrike headed for the den.

She hadn't gotten there when a yowl came from behind her and she whirled around. Cats were flooding into the camp, teeth bared and eyes ablaze. Nightshrike yowled as one of them crashed into her, knocking her off her paws and slamming her head on the ground.

Head throbbing and dazed, Nightshrike felt teeth sinking into her scruff and suddenly she was weightless as she was thrown across the clearing and skidded into the dust.

Vision blurry, Nightshrike made out the shape of a golden tabby tom. *Lionflight.* Her claws unsheathed and she staggered to her paws, hissing. "What are you doing here?" She demanded and dodged to the right as Lionflight lunged at her.

The tom let out a growl and glared at Nightshrike, who stood her ground despite the size difference. "Your pathetic Clan stole prey from GlacierClan," he hissed, tail lashing. "One of your useless apprentices crossed the border and stole a rabbit from us."

Nightshrike reared on her hind legs as he leaped for her again, swiping at his muzzle. Her claws met his mouth and blood sprayed the ground and Lionflight let out a hiss of pain.

Growling, Nightshrike pounced on his back and nipped at his ears. Her claws tore his back and her ears caught his yowl of pain. *That's it, Nightshrike.* Cooed the voice in her head, soft and urging. *Tear him to shreds. You want him to harm your Clanmates? Weaken him and tear his throat out.*

Claws struck her shoulder and Nightshrike yelped. Her grip on Lionflight loosened and he wiggled free, bouncing away to lick his wounds and glare at her. Turning to face her new opponent, her eyes landed on Perchwhisker.

The blue-tabby she-cat looked about ready to kill Nightshrike, but she wouldn't let that happen. Before her enemy could think of a way to attack, Nightshrike launched her self at Perchwhisker and slashed her cheek with a paw before scoring a blow to her shoulder.

Perchwhisker yowled in pain and anger and reared on her hind legs, raking her claws against Nightshrike's shoulder. As the tabby she-cat failed to connect her paw against Nightshrike's flank, the black-furred she-cat rammed her shoulder against her belly and clawed the soft flesh.

"Argh!" Wailed the blue tabby she-cat as she kicked Nightshrike away in panic and fled. Nightshrike turned, blood covering her face as she glared at Lionflight, who turned tail and took off after his Clanmate.

Nightshrike looked around, seeing her Clanmates clashing with so many GlacierClan warriors and apprentices. Songscratch and Birdfoot were exchanging blows near the Tall Tree while Spiderstar and Snowstar brawled.

Both leaders were covered ears to tail tip in the blood that gushed from their countless wounds. *Reedpaw better know how to quickly treat all of us.* Nightshrike thought as she heard a screech coming from the elders' den. Turning her head to look, Nightshrike gasped at what she saw.

At the paws of Rowantail lay Deerstripe, her throat slashed open with blood creating a rivulet as it trickled from her fatal wound. Nightshrike's world turned upside down and began to spin. *Not*

Deerstripe. No, no, no. She staggered, trying to comprehend what happened but all she could see was the look of pure terror and horror on the dead elder's face and the endless river of blood that poured from her neck.

Nightshrike stared numbly at the she-cat, the battle around her beginning to feel far away. Was StarClan happy that Rowantail took the life of a cherished elder? Were they glad that she would tell no more kits of her tales that were fantastic and intriguing?

Nightshrike looked at Rowantail, who looked just as shocked as Nightshrike and the cats who ignored their rivalry to see the dead elder. Rowantail met her eyes, his own wide and broken as he opened his mouth. He tried to speak, but nothing came from his mouth.

"Get out," croaked Nightshrike, her voice hoarse. "You've done enough damage today." Rowantail looked as though he wanted to explain what happened but Nightshrike cut him off. "I said leave, or I'll do the same thing you did to her but I'll make it even more painful."

Rowantail dropped her gaze and dragged his paws as he slowly made his way by Nightshrike, who put a paw in front of his chest. The tom stopped, confused.

"You were at the Moonpool when the medicine cats were killed, Rowantail." Nightshrike rasped, her voice raw and hostile. "You murdered Tanglewatcher and you murdered Deerstripe, both cats who did nothing to harm you."

Rowantail said nothing, only flattened his ears as Nightshrike spoke. *You can't say anything, Nightshrike.* Sneered the voice in her head. *You killed Blackheart at the Moonpool.*

"You, Rowantail, are a scourge on the name of the cats around the territories." She hissed, slashing his ear. "Get out of my sight, before you go to a place no cat wants to go when they die."

Not needing to be told again, Rowantail and his Clanmates fled, leaving Nightshrike and her Clanmates watching and with the dead

body of a beloved elder.

Chapter Twenty-One

Nightshrike barely heard Spiderstar calling for the cats who were attending the Gathering to get ready to go. Her paws felt numb and she felt weightless as she padded towards Iceleaf and Tawnywillow. Since Deerstripe's execution, Nightshrike was in her own exile. She hardly ate, scarcely slept, and constantly took Goldenpaw training.

He was shaping up to be a good tom, cocky but battle-hungry. *Just how I want him.* She thought and unsheathed her claws, her expression blank as she followed her Clanmates into the forest. This moon, Deerstripe's death and the four new apprentices would be announced.

Dread filled Nightshrike but she pushed it down, narrowing her eyes. She had Rowantail right where she wanted him yesterday when Deerstripe was killed and she led him go. *I should've shredded him where he stood.*

Reedpaw was padding with the other apprentices, chatting away like starlings in the morning of Greenleaf. *Leaffall is among us. The trees are losing their leaves and the days constantly grow shorter and shorter as time goes on. What is Leafbare like?*

As her thoughts crowded her mind, she didn't realize her Clan leader had stopped and she crashed right into him. "Hey!" She hissed and glared at Spiderstar, who eyed her warily before bounding down into the Gathering Hollow.

Memories of the night she spent with Thorntail filled her mind, making her cheeks flush and warm. *I wonder if he's here.* Shaking her head, she bounded into the throng of cats. *Is Rowantail here?*

Out of the corner of her eye, Nightshrike spotted the familiar flash of dark ginger and she instantly tensed. *Rowantail's Clan allowed him to come to the Gathering after he killed Deerstripe.*

She stalked towards the tom and his Clanmates, eyes and heart as

cold as ice. Her tail lashed to and fro, making her anger be known to those around her. Rowantail looked away from Otterfire and saw Nightshrike. His eyes flashed and Nightshrike unsheathed her claws.

Otterfire looked uneasy and quickly fled after Darkeyes, his tail streaming after him. Nightshrike sized up the ginger tom, eyes glowing with hate and anger.

"What are *you* doing here?" She hissed, startling Rowantail. "The Gathering is for noble warriors, not warriors that deliberately kill elders." Rowantail looked shocked then anger set into his eyes.

"If I recall," he spat. "You killed Blackheart at the Moonpool. You have no right to say that I am not a noble warrior." Rowantail looked smug, enraging Nightshrike further.

"You," she snarled. "Killed Tanglewatcher and Deerstripe. Therefore, you are not worthy of coming here. At least I felt guilty for killing Blackheart, you don't even *look* guilty for killing Tanglewatcher and Deerstripe."

Rowantail looked like he was about to burst with anger but a familiar voice called for Nightshrike. Her fur stood on end and she whirled around to see Thorntail waving at her with a paw raised.

She drew her lips into a snarl and glared at Rowantail. "The next time we meet in battle," she threatened, lashing her tail. "I will give you as much mercy as you gave the medicine cat and elder."

Without another word or second glance, Nightshrike stalked towards Thorntail, who looked confused and slightly hurt. *What's his problem?* She relaxed as she neared him, her heart lifting.

"Hey, Thorntail." Nightshrike's pelt burned at how small her voice sounded and she scolded herself. "How are you?" *Idiot.* She looked up at the large tom, who looked down at her with soft blue eyes.

"I'm doing better now that you're here." He replied smoothly, making Nightshrike warm. "Sit with me and let's talk before the Gathering starts." He purred.

Nightshrike nodded, sitting down and flicking her tail over her

paws. "How are Halfsnow and Thornbite?" She asked, her heart paining as she spoke of his family.

Thorntail purred. "They're doing just fine, thanks for asking." She glanced up, seeing amusement and warmth in his eyes. "Petalfire gave birth to Otterfire's second litter."

Nightshrike perked up at the mention of kits. "How many were born?" She asked, wanting to know if any of them had passed after their birth or were born dead.

Thorntail laughed, seeing Nightshrike's eagerness to learn about the kits. "Only three, from what I've heard. Sandykit, Duckkit, and Frogkit are just under a quarter moon old from what Hickorytree was saying."

Nightshrike nodded. "Healthy kits promise healthy apprentices and warriors." She meowed and flicked her tail tip ever so slightly.

Thorntail purred. "Well said, Nightshrike." He teased, placing his paw on her head and rubbing her fur. "You sound like an elder already."

Nightshrike flinched, looking at her paws. "Yeah," she meowed. Her paws shifted and she refused to look up at Thorntail.

"Cats from all Clans!" Boomed Snowstar, sounding furious. "Let the Gathering begin!"

Around Nightshrike, the conversations amongst the Clan cats settled and looked up at the leaders. She and Thorntail did the same, though she felt his tail wrap around her and pull her closer.

"I shall begin," meowed the she-cat, glaring at Spiderstar. "Earlier this moon, OakClan was caught stealing GlacierClan prey and refused to acknowledge their theft."

Spiderstar lashed his tail angrily. "We did not steal any prey, Snowstar." He growled through gritted teeth. "You attacked us for no reason I see fit."

Snowstar hissed and the cats below them yowled and snarled. "We

attacked because we needed to teach you that you should *never* steal our prey and not own up to it." She retorted.

"And what lesson did *you* learn, Snowstar?" Shouted Songscratch. "Attack us while we are doing our morning duties?"

Snowstar seethed in rage and Nightshrike saw her claws glinting in the moonlight. "We attack you," she hissed. "Because one of your apprentices crossed the border and stole our prey."

"You attacked us and costed the life of Deerstripe!" Yowled a cat that sounded familiar. Nightshrike realized that it was her who screeched. Thorntail looked at her in shock and Nightshrike glared at Snowstar, who glared back.

Eyes and heads turned to her, making Nightshrike uncomfortable. "Rowantail killed Deerstripe in cold blood and showed her no mercy." She went on, casting the tom a glare over her shoulder. "A cat who kills elders without a second thought should not be trusted within the walls of a camp. Let alone one with elders and kits that can't defend themselves."

Around her, cats from all the Clans shouted and yowled their opinions. Some wanted Rowantail to stay and others did not.

"We can't trust him!" Screeched Cedarpelt, who sat next to Spiritsight. "Drive him out of the Clans!"

"Shred his pelt!" Yowled Stormbird, leaping to her paws and glaring at Rowantail. "He isn't worthy of being called a Clan cat!"

"Silence!" Howled Snowstar, eyes enraged and narrowed. When the cats silenced, she spoke again. "I understand the fury and grief OakClan is going through and I have made up my mind." She looked at Rowantail, tail flicking. "Rowantail, come forward."

The ginger tom padded towards his leader, the cats around him parting so he could get through. He stopped a few tail-lengths away from the tree, looking up at his leader. "Yes, Snowstar?"

Snowstar rose to her paws and turned, leaping up a couple of branches and looked down at her warrior. "I, Snowstar, leader of

GlacierClan hereby sentence Rowantail into exile for the slaying of Deerstripe." She paused and her eyes flashed. "Leave now and never come back. If any of my cats see you on our territory after tonight, they have my permission to kill you."

Rowantail gaped at his leader in shock and Nightshrike smirked, tail flicking. "W-what?" He choked out, staring at Snowstar. Turning, he looked frantically around at the cats. Eventually, his eyes fell on Tawnyheart, his mate. "Tawnyheart, you know me. Help me, please!"

Tawnyheart looked away from her mate's pleading eyes and shook her head. "You killed an elder that didn't deserve to die, Rowantail." She meowed, her voice cracking. "Our kits will grow up without a father. They won't know that their father was a cold-hearted killer."

Hickorytree rubbed his muzzle against hers and glared at Rowantail. "Get out of here, Rowantail." He spat, eyes blazing. "Leave now or I'll make you."

Rowantail gaped at his former Clanmate and Tawnyheart. His eyes hardened and glared at them. "I will return, that is a promise." He snarled and spun on his heels and bounded away.

The clearing was in a stunned silence and Snowstar climbed down from the branch she was standing on and settled down next to Clearstar.

The ginger tabby tom rose to his white paws and began to speak. "DawnClan has nothing to report, we are doing fine and we are prepared for Leafbare." He meowed and sat back down.

Spiderstar rose to his paws and looked at Snowstar. "OakClan has been struggling under the weight of Deerstripe's death but we are coping okay." He meowed. "We also have four new apprentices! Welcome Goldenpaw, Amberpaw, Applepaw, and Snowpaw!"

"Goldenpaw! Amberpaw! Applepaw! Snowpaw!" Chanted the cats from below, Rowantail's exile forgotten.

"That is all I have to report." Concluded Spiderstar and sat back

down. "Duststar, it is your turn." He meowed, nodding.

The tom rose to his paws and dipped his head to Spiderstar. "NightClan has three new apprentices. Welcome, Cloverpaw, Duskpaw, and Fawnpaw!" He meowed. As the cats cheered and it died down, he spoke. "We have two new warriors among us, Shelltail and Brokenflower!"

"Shelltail! Brokenflower!" Cheered the gathered cats.

"That concludes this moon's Gathering." Meowed Duststar and leaped down from the tree. "Please go to your leaders and leave."

Nightshrike rose to her paws and looked at Thorntail, her fur on fire. "I'll see you in a few days," she meowed, cheeks flushing. "That is if you want to meet again."

Thorntail pressed against her, purring. "Of course I do," he meowed and licked her head quickly. "Goodnight, Nightshrike." He mewed and bounded after his Clanmates.

"Bye, Thorntail!" Nightshrike called after him and turned to follow her Clanmates home.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nightshrike watched her apprentice stalk a mouse, his tail twitched slightly and Nightshrike sighed softly. Goldenpaw tensed, his shoulders wiggling ever so slightly as he prepared to pounce on the mouse.

Nightshrike smirked, placing her paw on a dry leaf and making it crumble. The mouse's head shot up, as did Goldenpaw's and he watched as his prey scurried away faster than he could run.

"Hey!" Hissed Goldenpaw, tail lashing. "I had that!" He turned on his mentor, eyes flaring with anger. "What was that for?"

Nightshrike flicked her tail, chuckling. "You need to be quicker when you hunt, Goldenpaw." She meowed, gazing at him with amusement in her amber eyes. "Come on, let's head back to camp."

Without waiting for an answer, Nightshrike spun on her heels and padded towards the camp. Goldenpaw followed her, his eyes sharp and ears erect. Suddenly, he stopped and Nightshrike looked back at him in confusion and annoyance.

"Goldenpaw, let's go." She meowed sternly, seeing her apprentice look around. "Have you got bees in your brain? I said, let's go!" Nightshrike lashed her tail. "Fine, you're on tick duty for the rest of the day until you learn to follow orders."

Nightshrike padded towards her apprentice, her patience thinning. "Nightshrike to Goldenpaw!" She meowed, smacking his nose with a paw. That seemed to snap him out of his trance as he blinked at his mentor. "Come on, mousebrain." She rolled her eyes and turned away from him.

Suddenly, weight crashed into her and she lurched forward with a yelp of surprise. Goldenpaw had tackled her and she frowned. *What is this idiot doing?* Opening her mouth to reprimand him, she didn't get the chance to speak as a voice, smooth like honey began to

speak.

"Well, well, well," Nightshrike froze. *Uh oh.* "What do we have here?" A dark ginger tom with blazing yellow eyes approached them, his tail snaking after him.

"Rowantail," growled Nightshrike as she rose to her paws. "Get off my territory before I get my apprentice here to get more warriors." She threatened, glaring at the exiled tom.

Rowantail chuckled, sitting down with his tail wrapped neatly around his paws. "I'm sure you'll do that regardless of what I do, Nightshrike." He purred, making Nightshrike cringe. "You see, I have friends in your Clan. And surely you don't want your Clanmates to be punished for getting me exiled."

Nightshrike bared her teeth and unsheathed her claws. "Goldenpaw," she murmured. "Go get Iceleaf and a few warriors. We need to get him out of here before he tries something."

Too late, Rowantail had already leaped at Nightshrike. The black warrior shoved Goldenpaw away and reared on her hind legs, bracing for the weight and force of the tom to knock her off her paws. Rowantail crashed into her, making her gasp and fall on her back.

The tom sneered. "Go on, little apprentice. Fetch help and leave her to die a painful death." Rowantail put his paw on Nightshrike's throat and unsheathed his claws. They dug into her neck, making her wince.

Her eyes shifted to her apprentice, who looked nervous. "Go," she croaked. "Get help and leave me." Goldenpaw looked at his mentor. "I can handle him." Nightshrike gave him a small nod and kicked up with her hind legs and sprang at Rowantail.

Her claws struck his nose and she heard him yelp in pain. Dodging a slow blow to the shoulder, Nightshrike heard Goldenpaw fleeing paws race away behind her. A paw raked across her shoulder and she hissed in pain, returning the blow with her clawing his chest. Rowantail growled and sank his teeth into her shoulder, tossing her

against a tree.

She groaned as she hit the tree and struggled to her paws, legs trembling. Nightshrike heard Rowantail snickering and she shot him a glare, facing him in a defensive crouch once more. She charged, aiming a fake blow to his face before leaping to the side and slashing his flank.

Rowantail snapped his head around and bit into Nightshrike's tail, dragging her back. His forepaw made connection with her head and she hit the ground, grunting and groaning. "Had enough yet?" He sneered, raking his claws against her flank.

Nightshrike hissed and closed her eyes. She heard a grunt and leaves being crunched and she opened her eyes to see Rowantail being pinned down by a very furious Gorsewhisper.

Nightshrike's father slashed Rowantail on the face, chest, and head many times before stepping off the tom, eyes narrowed. "Why are you here, Rowantail?" He snarled and Nightshrike saw Rowantail flinch.

Vixenpool, Amberpaw, and Mistyflake hurried over to Nightshrike and looked down at her with worry. The world spun and Nightshrike groaned, trying to sit up but failing.

Vixenpool nosed her way under Nightshrike and heaved her onto her shoulders with a grunt of effort. She turned to Mistyflake. "Go help Gorsewhisper. Amberpaw and I can get Nightshrike back to camp." She told the she-cat.

"Too late!" Sneered Rowantail and Nightshrike looked up to see the tom standing on Gorsewhisper's body, blood gushing from the same wound that killed Deerstripe. "Run while you can, you cowards!" He taunted and turned tail and sprinted off into the forest.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Nightshrike groaned and opened her eyes, finding herself in Reedpaw's new den. She saw the apprentice's back turned to her and sorting through some herbs. She blinked, seeing the clouds outside in the gray sky. *It's going to snow soon.* She thought with dread.

Her head ached and her whole body was sore from her fight with Rowantail. Memories of her scuffle with the dark ginger tom flooded her mind and the image of Deerstripe and Gorsewhisper's split necks made her unsheathe her claws. *He killed a beloved elder and a respected warrior in cold blood.*

"You're awake," mewed Reedpaw, turning to Nightshrike with sadness glittering in his green eyes. "You're lucky that Rowantail didn't kill you when your head hit the ground. He had you where he wanted you and he only killed Gorsewhisper." Grief cracked the tom's voice and Nightshrike flattened her ears.

"How are Voletuft, Dawnflame, and Songscratch coping?" She croaked, lifting her head and watching as the world spun. Nightshrike gagged and with a heave, a mound of slime sat in front of her with a bitter taste in her mouth.

Reedpaw scooped up a wad of moss and pushed the gunk away and buried it beneath the ground. He stared at where the vomit was and sighed, shoulders sagging. "They were quite shocked, but I gave them some thyme and camomile so they could calm down and grieve without causing a ruckus." He meowed.

"How are you coping?" Nightshrike asked, sitting up groggily. She studied her brother, seeing him drop her gaze and shuffle his paws. "Reedpaw?"

Reedpaw flattened his ears, eyes flashing with despair. "Rowantail used to be an honorable warrior, Nightshrike. He was respected by his Clanmates and the other Clans." His voice cracked. "Why would

he just up and kill two cats? Gorsewhisper had more seasons to live and Deerstripe could've done so much more for the Clan."

Nightshrike opened her mouth but dropped her head. "Reedpaw," she meowed carefully. "Every cat has to die eventually. Some sooner than others and we have to accept it and move on."

Reedpaw lashed his tail. "We can't move on from some deaths, can we? They just stick with us like a tick and refuse to let us rest." He sounded bitter and Nightshrike glanced up at him. He let out a long sigh and looked over at her. "You should get something to eat while I collect more herbs. I'll have Wrenpaw and Swiftpaw get some more moss."

Nightshrike didn't argue. *I don't want to be in here any longer than I have to.* She thought and dipped her head to her brother as she padded by and stepped into the camp. What she saw, surprised her slightly.

Volepaw, Pinepaw, Amberpaw, Applepaw, Snowpaw, and Goldenpaw were practicing their battle moves in the corner next to the nursery where Voletuft was leaving the den with a dandelion between her teeth. Nightshrike's mother had a sorrowful gleam in her eyes and she dragged her tail behind her as she headed for the camp entrance.

Wrenpaw and Swiftpaw were speaking with Cloverleap, comforting her about something that Nightshrike would rather not know about. As she turned her head, her eyes narrowed as she saw Halfthroat stalking up to her with his eyes narrowed and tail flicking.

"You're awake," he meowed gruffly. Nightshrike nodded, feeling awkward that she was speaking with her former mentor after she completed her training. "We are meeting in a quarter moon at the lakeside. You better be there."

Nightshrike tensed and nodded, watching Halfthroat storm away towards Ivyheart made her relax. *Who will be meeting this time?* She wondered and limped towards the fresh-kill pile. Her shoulders ached from hitting the tree and her shoulder wound burned under the cobwebs and marigold. *Get through it like a warrior, Nightshrike.*

Meowed the voice and she ground her teeth together.

As she reached the prey-pile, she saw a thin mouse and a squirrel. Hungrily, she snatched the squirrel and ate it in a few famished gulps. Swiping her tongue over her lips, she looked around and saw Iceleaf and Flightclaw talking quietly, their heads close together.

Rosespring and Marigoldscar were drinking from the stream that ran through camp and Nightshrike approached them, eager for a refreshing gulp of ice-cold water. As she settled next to Marigoldscar, she lapped at the water, gasping at how cold it was. She kept drinking until her throat burned from the cold and her tongue was tired. Pulling away, she dipped her head to the two warriors and padded off.

She had no idea where she was going but she headed for the leader's den. As she passed by, Nightshrike heard voices inside. They were hushed and quiet, but she could make out a few words. The cats inside were Spiderstar and Frostgaze, speaking to each other urgently.

"...Clan...kits...nursery...Iceleaf..." Was all she could hear from where she was standing, her ears angled towards the den inside the tree. *Iceleaf is expecting kits?* Nightshrike was shocked. *But she's so old! Surely she can't have kits at her age. Is she* is *having kits, who is the father?*

She shook her head and bounded away, not wanting to eavesdrop any longer. Turning her attention to her returning mother, Nightshrike padded towards Voletuft. "Are you okay?" She asked.

Her mother glanced at her, making her blood go cold. Her once lively, filled with love amber eyes were shadowed with exhaustion and grief from losing the one cat she fell in love with. "We're all suffering, Nightshrike," Voletuft whispered and her daughter tensed. "Are you suffering?"

Nightshrike didn't know what to say to her grieving mother. She looked at her mother, worried and she closed her mouth. *Am I suffering?* She asked herself as Voletuft shook her head softly and padded away, ears down.

Nightshrike watched her go, anger and resentment building up inside her. *Rowantail will pay for what he has done to my family.* She curled her lip into a silent snarl as she stalked towards the camp entrance. *He and his Clan will suffer for what he did. My wrath of revenge will cause chaos in his Clan; the same chaos that he has invoked in me.*

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nightshrike stalked through the forest, claws unsheathed as she headed away from camp and towards no cat's land. *If I want my revenge, I'll need followers. And if I need followers, I need to find cats willing to die for a cause that is not relevant to their lives.* Her heart pounded in her chest as she walked farther and farther away from where she grew up but she shook her head. *I need to do this without my Clanmates holding me back.*

As she stormed through the forest, the brunt of Gorsewhisper's death hit her harder than she thought. The blood gushing from his neck, the last words he spoke, the way he fought Rowantail to save Nightshrike made her double over and let out a wail of grief and sorrow.

What are these feelings? I'm a warrior, not a soft-hearted kittypet! Forcing herself to keep moving, Nightshrike felt her pelt prickle with unease as she arrived at a small Twolegplace, filled with foul smells and loud Twolegs and huge red dens that were taller than the Tall Tree in OakClan's camp. *I don't like this.* She was tempted to turn back but her paws kept moving.

"Hey, you!" A voice made Nightshrike jump in surprise and she saw a brown tabby tom with green eyes lounging on a fence. "Where are you from, stranger? I've never seen you 'ere before."

Nightshrike swallowed and unsheathed her claws, allowing them to scrape against the stone. "My name is Nightshrike," she meowed, glaring at the tom. "Who are you?" Her tail lashed and the tom seemed nervous but answered in a smooth voice.

"My name's Dew, m'lady." He meowed, rising to his paws and leaping down from the fence. Dew was skinnier than a kittypet and did not have a collar around his neck. *Unlike the kittypet I killed to get my warrior name.* She shuddered. "What're you doin' here?"

Nightshrike straightened. "Do you have a leader that you follow?"

She asked, trying to size up the semi-large tom. He studied her and flicked his tail.

"Follow me, Nightheight." He meowed and turned towards a narrow strip between two large Twoleg dens and stopped in front of a Thunderpath. *What is he doing?*

"It's Night*shrike*," she corrected sharply and watched him roll his eyes. Dew watched the monsters roar by until he sprinted into the middle of the Thunderpath, Nightshrike on his heels as they streaked to the other side, panting and breathing hard. "What was that?" She growled.

Dew didn't look bothered. Instead, he trotted towards a bunch of large, dark green rectangles and climbed up one, waiting for Nightshrike. "Come on, Nightshrike." He called and disappeared over the top. "This way."

"Slow down, why don't you?" She retorted and pelted after him, leaping up the smaller thing and landing on the other side next to Dew. "What are we doing here?" Nightshrike glared at the tom. "I thought you were taking me to your leader?"

"Oh, he did, Nightshrike." Purred a familiar voice and she turned her head to see Apple lounging on a pile of garbage. "What do you want, Clan cat?" Amusement danced in his eyes and Nightshrike glared at him.

"I wish to challenge you, Apple," she meowed, standing up straight. Nightshrike saw surprise flash in the eyes of her former leader and she drew her lips back into a sneer. "Unless you're too much of a coward to fight your former Clanmate." She taunted and saw rage flare in his eyes.

A dark brown tabby tom next to him arched his back in a hiss. "How dare you challenge my leader like that?" The tom looked far less than friendly and Nightshrike smirked.

"Stand down, Dusk," mused Apple. He had risen to his paws and was glaring at Nightshrike. "I accept your challenge, Nightshrike. But what have you got to gain?" He asked, eyes narrowing. "Don't

you like being in a Clan with Gorsewhisper and your family?"

"Gorsewhisper is dead," she spat. "Deerstripe and Gorsewhisper died at the claws of Rowantail." Nightshrike watched as Apple's eyes roared to life with anger. "If I defeat you," she went on. "I will command every cat and gain followers to destroy GlacierClan for Rowantail's sins." Nightshrike saw Dusk and Dew glance at their leader, waiting for him to reply.

Apple flicked his tail and leaped down in front of Nightshrike. His eyes gleamed with an unknown emotion and shook his head. "You do not belong here, Nightshrike." He spoke softly, as though speaking to a troubled kit. "Go back to OakClan."

Anger boiled inside Nightshrike and she unsheathed her claws, letting them scrape against the stone ground. "You don't deserve to be called a leader!" She screeched as Dew and Dusk gently pushed her back. She fought back, shoving them away but two more cats flanked her, shoving her away. Tears streamed down her cheeks as Nightshrike spat at her former leader. "We hate you! You should've left OakClan long ago! Vixenpool and Redstripe deserve a better mate and father than *you*!"

Apple looked hurt but he shook his head and flicked his tail, sitting down and watching as his former Clanmate was escorted away, screeching.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Nightshrike?" Goldenpaw batted her muzzle with a paw, making her hiss. "Are you okay?" A moon passed since she went to challenge Apple and since then, she was snappy and harsh. Even to Reedpaw and Voletuft, she hissed and snarled. Within that moon, Goldenpaw and herself grew a lot. Nightshrike was now the height of Voletuft and Goldenpaw was the size of Flightclaw.

Voletuft had given birth to three small kits. Graykit, Wolfkit, and Ferretkit were strong but smaller than the average litter of kits. Since they were born a moon early, they were kept in Reedpaw's den so they could be monitored during the day and night. Frostgaze also gave birth to three kits, Poolkit, Lakekit, and Wildkit were as playful as they were reckless. Not only did Voletuft and Frostgaze give birth, Iceleaf did too. She gave birth to two daughters: Sedgekit and Silverkit. With so many kits in the nursery, some warriors had to expand the den so they all could fit.

With the deputy in the nursery with wailing kits, Spiderstar appointed a new deputy. Secretly, Nightshrike was wanting to be chosen but instead, he chose Tawnywillow. Tawnywillow was an okay choice, Nightshrike and the senior warrior didn't cross paths often, but she respected the deputy somewhat.

Goldenpaw's swat at her muzzle snapped Nightshrike from her trance and she unsheathed her claws and slashed his muzzle. Blood sprayed the ground and Goldenpaw let out a hiss of pain and crouched down, glaring up at his mentor with hate. "What was *that* for?" He demanded as Nightshrike licked her claws.

"Oh, nothing." She smirked and rose to her paws. "Do you want to earn your warrior name a bit early?" Nightshrike watched as her apprentice nodded eagerly. She got in his face, surprising the tom. "Would you kill a cat for it?" She asked, breathing on his bloody muzzle.

"Yes," breathed Goldenpaw, gazing up at his mentor with wide eyes.

"What will we do?" He asked and Nightshrike grinned, feeling her claws digging into the ground.

"We will be getting another deputy," with a smirk, she turned around and padded back to camp with Goldenpaw on her heels.

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It wasn't hard to get Tawnywillow out in the open. All Nightshrike and Goldenpaw had to do was report to the deputy that there was something they needed to discuss without the company of any other warriors.

"What is it you need to discuss, Nightshrike?" The oblivious deputy asked when Nightshrike and Goldenpaw told her.

"It's private," Nightshirke had replied and flicked her tail. "It's about Gorsewhisper's death."

Now, they were padding through the forest to a secluded part of the territory. Nightshrike faced the deputy, lips curled into a dangerous smile. Behind Tawnywillow, Goldenpaw crouched down, snarling.

"What is this?" Demanded the she-cat, looking from Goldenpaw to Nightshrike. "Nightshrike, what are you-" She didn't get the time to ask when Goldenpaw leaped at the she-cat with a loud hiss. *Good.* Thought Nightshrike as she watched her apprentice slash his claws across Tawnywillow's shoulder.

Tawnywillow let out a howl of pain and fury and lashed out with a paw, catching the golden tabby apprentice on the ear and leaving a large sideways V. Nightshrike grinned maniacally and pounced on the deputy, snatching her ear between her teeth and biting through the flesh. With all her might, Nightshrike jerked her head back and felt the skin tear away and Tawnywillow yowled in pain.

Goldenpaw bounced back, a gash on his chest but his eyes burned bright with malice and cold excitement as Nightshrike pinned Tawnywillow to the ground, one paw on her chest and the other on her neck. Nightshrike saw fear in the she-cats eyes and she sneered.

"Scared, deputy?" She taunted and easily dodged a weak blow to

her shoulder. "You should be." Tawnywillow's eyes widened in shock as Nightshrike pressed down on her throat, gasping.

"Y-you had so much p-potential." Croaked the deputy, eyes bulging and slowly starting to glaze over. "S-Spiderstar saw g-greatness inside you, N-Nightshrike."

Nightshrike unsheathed her claws, allowing them to prick Tawnywillow's neck. "And that greatness will aid me in becoming deputy and then leader of OakClan." Tawnywillow blinked at her, wheezing. "And when I'm leader, I will destroy GlacierClan. First, I need to rid the Clan of your deputyship." She smiled. "Say hello to Gorsewhisper and Deerstripe for me, Tawnywillow." As the deputy's eyes rolled in the back of her head, Nightshrike pushed down as hard as she could until the deputy stopped moving and breathing.

"Is she dead?" Asked Goldenpaw, startling Nightshrike. The tom watched from a distance, eyes unreadable. Nightshrike nodded and grasped the dead she-cat's scruff in her jaws.

"Let's get her home and prepare for your ceremony." She growled through Tawnywillow's fur as she and Goldenpaw dragged the deputy away.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"By the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name." The mew of Spiderstar made Nightshrike glance at her apprentice, something washing through her. *What is this?* She wondered but watched silently. "From this moment on, you will be known as Goldenfire. StarClan honors your skills in hunting and fighting and we welcome you as a full member of OakClan." Spiderstar touched the new warrior's forehead with his nose and in turn, Goldenfire licked his shoulder.

"Goldenfire! Goldenfire! Goldenfire!" Cheered Nightshrike's Clanmates and she saw Goldenfire's chest puffing out with pride. *He better not think that just because a warrior, he doesn't have anything else to learn.* She thought darkly as the tom sat down next to Redstripe and Blueheart.

"Before you return to your duties," Spiderstar went on. "I must appoint a new deputy in replacement of Tawnywillow, who died much too early." The cats around Nightshrike straightened and she found herself doing the same, waiting for her leader to announce the new deputy. "I say these words before the body and spirit of Tawnywillow so she may hear an approve my choice. The new deputy of OakClan will be Halfthroat."

Nightshrike felt resentment boil her blood as her former mentor rose to his paws and padded forward, every hair on her pelt burned with anger and jealousy. Halfthroat looked pleased and he turned to address the Clan.

"I am greatly honored by Spiderstar's decision and I know I will never be half the deputy Tawnywillow was." His tone was laced in mock grief and Nightshrike bristled. "But I vow to do as best I can."

Nightshrike seethed in rage, tail lashing. *Why was Halfthroat chosen to be deputy and not me?* Her claws unsheathed and she pressed them into the ground. As Spiderstar dismissed the Clan, Nightshrike padded towards Halfthroat. "Are we still going to meet with the

others?" She asked, struggling to keep the anger out of her voice.

Halfthroat licked a gray paw and washed his ear, looking at Nightshrike as if he was bored. "I was wondering when you would ask me that," he mused, raising his paw and unsheathing his claws. He studied his claws, annoying Nightshrike. "The Gathering is tomorrow, we'll see them then." He turned his head to Nightshrike. "Run along now, Nightshrike."

Nightshrike curled her lips back into a snarl but her growling stomach pulled her away from clawing Halfthroat's pelt. Turning away, she stalked towards the fresh-kill pile and snatched up a starling and sat down underneath a willow tree.

Pawsteps approached her and Nightshrike looked up to see Swiftsoul padding up to her. "Hey, Nightshrike," he mewed, gesturing to her starling. "Wanna share?"

Nightshrike growled quietly in annoyance and nodded reluctantly, shifting away as he sat down next to her. "Go ahead, I'm not hungry." She lied, looking away from the black and white spotted tom.

"You sure?" He asked, pushing the bird towards her with a spotted paw. When she glared at him, Swiftsoul held her gaze calmly. "You need to eat, Nightshrike." The young warrior pressed softly, nudging the bird closer to her.

Fed up with his insistence, she snapped. "I'm not hungry, Swiftsoul!" He looked at her in shock as she rose to her paws and stormed away, tail slashing the air. Squeals came from the elders den and Nightshrike watched as Graykit, Wolfkit, and Ferretkit were chased out of the den by a rather angry-looking Cloverleap.

The three kits looked excited and mischievous as they took cover behind Voletuft, who was basking in the sun outside the nursery. Graykit hid in her mother's tail while Wolfkit and Ferretkit hid behind her back, poking their heads up to watch Cloverleap.

"Voletuft, those rascals of yours keep bugging me while I'm trying to rest!" She growled, glaring angrily at the two visible kits.

Nightshrike detected slight amusement and begrudging love for the three kits.

Voletuft purred. "Now, what did I tell you three about pestering the elders when they're trying to have a nap?" She raised her tail, exposing Graykit. She let out a squeak and hurried to join her siblings, who sprinted into the nursery. Nightshrike's mother chuckled and looked up at Cloverleap. "You know you adore the kits, Cloverleap." She teased.

The elder purred with amusement. "That's quite true," she meowed. "Well, I better see if I can go see Vixenpool and Amberpaw. I hear Amberpaw has been training hard to become a warrior." She stretched and let out a yawn. "See you around, Voletuft."

Nightshrike padded away, not wanting to be around her mother. *Maybe Reedfrost wants me to collect some herbs.* She headed towards the medicine den, hearing voices inside.

"-alf-Clan." That was Spiderstar's voice and the fur along Nightshrike's neck and spine rose. "We can't be sheltering a potentially dangerous cat."

Reedfrost sighed. "She can't be any more suspicious than a hungry fox that stole prey." Nightshrike crouched down next to the entrance of the den, listening closely. "Since Tawnywillow's death and her and Goldenfire not being in camp, suspicions are higher than the Tall Tree."

Nightshrike froze out of fear. *They're talking about me. But, I can't be half-Clan, can I?* She stifled a hiss and she shifted closer to the den, pressing her ear to the wall.

"What will you do with her?" Reedfrost's question was soft and quiet, making Nightshrike bristle. "If you are right, she cannot live within the confines of the camp with so many kits in the nursery."

Spiderstar was silent for a moment before he spoke. "I'm afraid I have only one choice." The whole world held its breath as Spiderstar went on. "I must exile Nightshrike from OakClan."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Nightshrike padded alongside her Clanmates as they made their way towards the Gathering Hollow, her entire body rigid with tension. *Spiderstar is going to exile me, but for what? He has nothing he can use against me. Sure, Goldenfire and I weren't in camp when Tawnywillow died, but that could mean anything!* Her black pelt burned with anger but she managed to hide it from her Clanmates.

She hadn't talked to any of them since she overheard Reedfrost and Spiderstar's conversation about her. Nightshrike's heart burned with the need for revenge and she felt a strong urge to slaughter any cat that looked at her as though she were a rogue or an outcast. *Control yourself, Nightshrike.* Purred the menacing voice. *Keep your anger inside until the right moment to let it all out.*

A chilly breeze ruffled the pelts of Nightshrike's Clanmates and she saw many of them shivering or pressing against their mates to keep warm. She stifled a snort. *Weak.*

"We're here," meowed Spiderstar as he descended into the Gathering Hollow, his Clan following in suit. Nightshrike didn't hesitate to plunge after him, her paws tingling as she looked around for a special cat.

She finally spotted Thorntail in the middle of a cluster of NightClan, GlacierClan, and DawnClan cats. Nightshrike slowly made her way towards the tom, tail and chin high in the air as she padded towards the handsome tom. As their eyes met, warmth flooded through Nightshrike, making her feel as though she were floating.

"Hi, Thorntail." She purred once she made it to the tom. She sat down right next to him, gazing up at him with warm eyes. Thorntail gazed down at her, a big dumb smile plastered across his lips.

"Hello, Nightshrike." Meowed the large tom as he licked her head sneakily. Sparks shot through Nightshrike as his tongue rasped over her head, making her dizzy. "What's new in OakClan?" He asked,

tail flicking around her.

"Reedpaw got his full medicine cat name," she meowed, dazed. "He's now Reedfrost." Thorntail purred, encouraging her to go on. "We have so many new kits in the nursery. Voletuft gave birth to three, Frostgaze had three, Iceleaf had two, and Ivyheart also had two."

Thorntail chuckled. "That's a lot of hungry mouths to feed for your Clan," he commented, shaking his head. "Anything else?" He stared into Nightshrike's eyes, which differed in color. While his were an icy blue, Nightshrike's were a burning amber that melted when he looked at her.

"W-well," she stumbled over her words, trying to pull herself together for his sake. "Deerstripe and Gorsewhisper died, so did Tawnywillow. In her place for deputy is Halfthroat."

Thorntail was quiet for a moment before slowly nodding. "Losing cats you love is hard," he meowed softly. "But in time, the pain will slowly release its grip on you." He pressed closer to her until their pelts brushed ever so slightly.

Nightshrike couldn't breathe, not wanting the tom to pull away as fast as he did. Thorntail looked up at the leaders, who were waiting for the attention of their Clans in order to start.

"Cats of all Clans! Let the Gathering begin!" Meowed Blackdust. "I shall begin with some sad news. Duststar has joined StarClan after a deadly fight with a badger earlier this moon." The clearing fell silent as a tribute to the fallen leader. "But in the wake of his death, I have better news. Eeltail is the cat I have chosen to become my deputy and Dusthawk has become a full medicine cat thanks to Timberskip's training and patience."

Purrs and cheers of congratulations rumbled in the throats of the cats around Nightshrike, who felt uncomfortable. Thorntail nudged her and winked, making her fur blaze with embarrassment.

"Also," continued the new leader. "Otterflower is back in the nursery and is expecting Lionstorm's kits once more." Chuckling could be heard from the older warriors and Nightshrike shook her head.

"I shall go next," declared Snowstar as she rose to her paws. "GlacierClan is doing rather well since Leaffall has started. We are well-fed and we welcome three new apprentices to their first Gathering. Please welcome Sandypaw, Duckpaw, and Frogpaw!"

"Sandypaw! Duckpaw! Frogpaw!" Cheered the Clans, their voice echoing off the trees and reaching the cold stars.

"That is all I have to report this moon," concluded Snowstar as she sat back down and gestured for Clearstar to begin his report.

The ginger tom dipped his head and faced the cats. "It is with a heavy heart that I announce the retirement of our deputy, Hollowstream. Sadly, he became too old to serve the Clan as deputy but we wish him many moons of hard-earned rest." He bowed his head and went on. "Echospeck is our new deputy and Fennelfur gave birth to two healthy kits last night."

Spiderstar rose to his paws and flicked his tail. "I have a lot to announce, sadly." He meowed, sounding sad and pained. "However, we have a bunch of new kits in the nursery this Leaffall. Voletuft, Frostgaze, Iceleaf, and Ivyheart, gave birth to so many kits, we've had to expand the nursery to fit them all." Purrs of amusement filled the clearing. "Tawnywillow, the deputy, has sadly joined StarClan. Halfthroat is our new deputy in her place. With loss brings new life and Reedpaw has earned his full medicine cat name and now goes by Reedfrost."

The tom looked around the cats, brushing over Nightshrike and resting his gaze on the medicine cat. "That is all I have to report this moon. Please go to your respected leaders and leave."

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"Nightshrike!" A paw jabbed Nightshrike in the side and she groaned, lifting her head to see Littlewing standing in front of her. "Spiderstar has called a Clan meeting." He explained quickly and dashed off.

Nightshrike grunted and followed him, yawning as she exited the den. Clouds covered the sky and she saw Littlewing returning to his

spot next to Honeyheart. The Clan seemed to be waiting as they turned their heads to face the black-furred warrior.

"Nightshrike," Spiderstar's tone was pained and she looked up at the leader. "Come here, please." She nodded and padded towards the Sky Tree, nervous about what may occur. "I, Spiderstar, leader of OakClan hereby sentence Nightshrike into exile for suspicions of killing Tawnywillow."

Nightshrike heard cats gasping all around her and she did so as well, just for the act. She forced her eyes to widen and she looked up at the leader. "I had nothing to do with her death!" She wailed, looking at him in the eyes. "Goldenfire and I were patrolling the border with Tawnywillow and we were attacked by a fox!"

Spiderstar shook his head, eyes flashing. "I don't believe you, as there was no fox scent anywhere near where Tawnywillow's body was found." He glared at Nightshrike. "Leave now and never return. If you do, you will meet the same fate Tawnywillow did at your claws."

Anger boiled her blood and she snarled. "This is not the last you hear of me, OakClan!" She glared around at each of her Clanmates, who hissed and hurled insults at her. "I will be back, that is a promise!"

"Nightshrike..." Voletuft's meow made her turn her head to her mother. "What has happened to you? Blackheart and Specklewatcher will be so disappointed that their only surviving kit killed one of her Clanmates."

Nightshrike hissed. "I don't care what they think!" Voletuft flinched. "I don't know who Specklewatcher is and I don't care! They're dead! StarClan doesn't exist and neither does my family!"

"Blackheart and Specklewatcher *were* your family, Nightshrike." Meowed Toadpad, stepping up. "They are your parents. Gorsewhisper and Voletuft helped raise you when your siblings and your mother died. They tried so hard."

Nightshrike lashed her tail. "Not hard enough," she snarled and

raced through her Clanmates until she burst through the thorn barrier and exploded into the forest.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Nightshrike hated being alone, especially when she had nowhere to go and night had fallen. Her claws tore at the grass as she padded towards the border with DawnClan. She seethed in rage and glared up at the night sky, where the stars gleamed coldly with unasked questions.

"I didn't deserve this!" She shouted at the stars, growling in frustration as she lashed out with a paw and ripped her claws against the grass. With her paws stained green, Nightshrike headed for the border. In order to reach the border however, she had to pass by the Mossy Grove and the Sand Hollow, two of the most popular places to train and collect moss in OakClan.

Her tail slashed at the night air, making the fur on her neck rise as she remembered every second of her Clanmates' reactions to her exile. Voletuft was mortified for some reason that Nightshrike could not grasp. Toadpad didn't seem fazed but so many other cats seemed heartbroken and angry. Iceleaf had shielded her kits from the horrors of an exile and Voletuft had retreated back into the nursery after Toadpad had begun to speak to Nightshrike. *Weak, pathetic excuses of warriors.* She thought eyes narrowed. *Real warriors do not blind themselves with their families or kits. A real warrior wishes to be at the front of the fight, taking every blow.*

"Hey!" Nightshrike looked up, not realizing her meddling had landed her right across the river from DawnClan's border. "Stay where you are and don't cross the border!" The cat calling to her was Larkflight, a cat Nightshrike had only heard about from Thorntail's Clanmates. With the black tom was Halfsnow, Thorntail's mate, and Poppybee.

"That's an OakClan warrior," whispered Poppybee, though Nightshrike heard her. "What's she doing here away from her Clan?"

Halfsnow flicked her tail over Poppybee's mouth and regarded Nightshrike warily. "What brings you to the border, Nightshrike? It's

almost moonhigh, you should be sleeping in your camp." She tilted her head and Nightshrike glared at her.

"I go where I please," she spat. "OakClan and I didn't get along so I left before Spiderstar could exile me." Nightshrike lied, the words slipping out of her mouth like honey. "Those mouse-hearts couldn't live without their precious rules so I left after the Gathering last night."

Larkflight stared at her in shock and slight awe. "Want to spend the night at our camp until morning?" He offered, slightly surprising his patrol and Nightshrike.

She faked being wistful. "No, no, no. I-I don't want to be a burden to such a powerful Clan." Nightshrike shook her head and saw the desperation flash in Larkflight's sun-like eyes. "You're already having to feed your Clanmates. I would only be another mouth to feed."

"Nonsense," that was Halfsnow, gazing at her sympathetically. "From what I've heard from Thorntail, you're a strong and independent warrior." Nightshrike heard a twinge of jealousy in the she-cats mew. "I'm sure Clearstar wouldn't mind you staying with us."

Poppybee spoke up. "Why don't we take her to Clearstar and ask if she could spend the night and in the morning, he could decide what to do with her." She suggested and Larkflight nodded.

"Follow us, Nightshrike." The tom purred and gestured with his tail to cross the oak tree that allowed access to the different territories.

Nightshrike nearly purred out loud as she crossed the border, a smug smile on her face as the three warriors escorted her to the camp. Surprisingly, many cats were awake inside the camp. Some were chatting, sharing tongues, and many were sharing prey. By what looked like the nursery, two kits were playing with a pebble, trying to get it past the other to get a point.

"Who's that?" Asked a rather rude voice and Nightshrike saw three warriors glaring at her. One of which was Thorntail's daughter,

Thornbite.

"That's an OakClan cat!" Whispered a light gray tabby tom Nightshrike recognized as Lichenstorm. "What's she doing here?"

"Larkflight!" Cried a white she-cat with bright amber eyes. She hurled herself at the tom and sniffed him all over, making his ears flatten in embarrassment. "Are you okay? Did she hurt you?"

"Of course not, Whiteblaze," purred the tom as he licked her head. Nightshrike assumed they were mates, just how Whiteblaze fussed over him made it clear they weren't mother and son, brother and sister, or father and daughter.

"Larkflight," meowed another voice and the tom looked up at the voice of Clearstar, who stood on a fallen tree. "What have you brought here tonight?" He asked, eyes flicking to Nightshrike quizzically.

Larkflight shook off Whiteblaze and padded to Nightshrike's side, his eyes gleaming like stars. "Clearstar, this is Nightshrike. She left her Clan and has nowhere else to go. Can she stay with us tonight so she may eat and sleep before we decide what to do with her?" He sounded desperate and Nightshrike flicked her tail, holding Clearstar's gaze.

Nightshrike felt fur brush against her flank and sparks shot through her at who she saw. Thorntail was looking up at Clearstar with pleading blue eyes. A rush of affection filled her and she leaned against the tom ever so slightly.

"Clearstar," he meowed strongly. "Nightshrike is one of the kindest and strong cats I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. If she cannot stay here within the walls of our camp, then I shall leave with her."

Gasps of shock echoed in Nightshrike's ears, the loudest being from Halfsnow. "T-Thorntail," she choked out, staring at her mate in hurt. "I-I thought you loved me. Y-you said you and Nightshrike were just close f-friends."

Thorntail met her broken gaze steadily. "My feelings for you have dissolved when I met Nightshrike when she was an apprentice many moons ago." He meowed, tail flicking around Nightshrike and pulling her closer. "I'm grateful that Thornbite and Fennelfur started families of their own but I do not wish to be mates with a cat I do not share feelings with."

Halfsnow looked heartbroken but she nodded nonetheless and hurried off, leaving the Clan in an intense silence as they waited for Clearstar to speak.

"This," the ginger leader meowed, regaining his voice. "Is very peculiar indeed. Nightshrike, you may stay here and in the morning when we have settled down, I shall choose your fate."

Nightshrike dipped her head to the leader, though she didn't mean it. Thorntail purred and liked her head, making her purr for the first time since the Gathering. "Thank you, Clearstar." She breathed.

When the Clan dispersed, Thorntail faced her with excited blue eyes. "Come on, I'll show you my nest." He meowed eagerly and trotted happily towards what appeared to be the warrior's den. Nightshrike followed him more cautiously, looking over her shoulder every once and a while before slipping inside.

The den was bigger than she thought and she saw Thorntail picking his way by some already sleeping cats and stopped at the back corner of the den. No nests were around his and he sat down, tail flicking invitingly.

Nightshrike wasted no time in crossing the den in a few strides and curling up with Thorntail, who licked her head and eventually fell asleep with his body curled around hers.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Nightshrike dreamed of something she hadn't expected in a long time. She was in a large den with three bundles of fur nestled at the curve of her belly. There was a gray tabby tom with black stripes and lighter paws, a golden-brown tabby she-cat with creamy paws, and a silver she-cat with black spots.

Nightshrike frowned and lifted her head as a shadow fell on the kits. It was Thorntail. Or, a dream version of the cat Nightshrike fell in love with. This Thorntail looked proud and affection swam in his blue eyes.

"They're beautiful, Nightstar." He purred and Nightshrike stared at him, though her dream self let out at purr. Nightstar? "What will we name them?"

"I'm not sure, Thorntail." Replied Nightshrike's dream self and suddenly, she was kicked out of her body and she watched as she smiled at the kits. Frantically, she looked at her paws and noticed they were see-through. What is going on? She wanted to screech but she couldn't form any words. "Why don't we name the silver and black spotted one Spottedkit?"

Thorntail nodded, eyes sparkling. "That sounds wonderful," he breathed and touched his tail to the gray tabby. "What about Larkkit?" He meowed, looking at Nightstar, and Nightshrike watched herself closely.

Nightstar closed her eyes and Nightshrike could sense the pain coming off her dream self. "Larkflight was such a noble deputy," the leader meowed after a long pause. "Whiteblaze and their kits haven't gotten over his death." She fixed Thorntail with a soft look. "That sounds perfect."

Thorntail purred and pointed with a paw to the golden-brown she-cat. "What about her?" He questioned, tail tip twitching as he looked down at his daughter.

Nightstar was silent for a moment before she replied. "Her name will be

Leafkit." She meowed and Thorntail dipped his head. The tom padded around his mate and kits and curled around Nightstar, making Nightshrike relax slightly.

"Why don't you get some sleep, my dear." Thorntail licked Nightstar's head gently and Nightshrike nearly purred out loud at the action. "In the morning, I'll bring you the biggest piece of prey in the forest."

Nightstar yawned and Nightshrike watched as she nodded and laid her head on her paws, eyes closing. Thorntail licked her head once more before uncurling around her and padding out of the den without another word.

"Nightshrike!" An anxious mew roused Nightshrike from the dream and her head shot up, making her dizzy. She opened her eyes, blinking as sleep began to ebb away. Thorntail was in front of her, eyes wide and nervous. "Come on, Clearstar has called a meeting."

Nightshrike shook her head and rose to her paws, now fully awake. The remnants of her dream remained in her head as she padded into the clearing where everyone old enough to attend the meeting were gathering.

"Clanmates," Clearstar sounded tired and Nightshrike saw the Clan leader's tail droop as he spoke. "I have thought long and hard about this and I have made my decision." Nightshrike's fur prickled as every cat looked at her, making her press against Thorntail.

"Don't worry," purred the blue-eyed tom, licking her cheek lovingly. "Clearstar won't kick you out of the Clan."

"Nightshrike, do you promise to uphold the Warrior Code and protect your new Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Clearstar's question hit her hard, making her stagger. *He's accepting me in his Clan.* She gaped at the leader and fumbled for her answer.

"I-I do, Clearstar," she managed and looked at Thorntail, who looked happy and excited.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I name you a full warrior of DawnClan." Meowed Clearstar as he bounded towards her and

touched his nose to her forehead. As he pulled away, he looked around at the rest of his Clan. "Nightshrike is one of us and she shall be treated as though she has lived with us the entire time." He meowed sternly and Nightshrike watched as the cats around them nodded.

"Nightshrike!" Yowled Thorntail, eyes gleaming with joy.

"Nightshrike!" Larkflight chimed in, sitting next to Whiteblaze.

Soon, every cat was cheering her name and Nightshrike lifted her head, soaking it all in. *GlacierClan and OakClan will suffer.* She silently vowed.

Chapter Thirty

Nightshrike lifted her head, her dead thrush laying beneath her paws as she waited for Stormbird and Robinfire to catch up. Two days passed since Clearstar had welcomed her into his Clan and Nightshrike was doing well. While not completely used to the territory, she had been trying to get on as many patrols as she could to earn the respect of her fellow warriors.

During those two days, Thorntail would talk with her whenever they weren't on patrols or helping around the camp. Since Fennelfur's kits, Leafkit and Jaykit weren't three moons old yet, the warriors were tasked by Echospeck to take on apprentice duties. Even though Hollowstream reminded her painfully of Deerstripe, Nightshrike spent as much time as she could with the former deputy.

She had gotten close with a couple of DawnClan's warriors rather quickly and soon, Nightshrike had a small group of friends she would constantly be patrolling with. Stormbird, Robinfire, Poppybee, and Larkflight were her little followers that Nightshrike appreciated. *Only their loyalty, though.* She reminded herself. *I wouldn't want any divided loyalty in my followers.*

"Great catch, Nightshrike." Purred Stormbird, looking at her prey. "Scrawny, but it'll keep Leafkit and Jaykit from wailing about their empty bellies all night long."

Robinfire nudged Stormbird, eyes sparkling. "Let's get the rest of our prey and head back." She suggested. "Wouldn't want to catch a cold."

Nightshrike nodded silently and picked up her thrush, padding with Stormbird to her right and Robinfire to her left as they headed for the place they buried their catches. Nightshrike caught two measly mice and her thrush, Robinfire caught a vole and a squirrel, and Stormbird caught a crow and another thrush. In all, it was a pretty good hunt for a cold Leafbare morning.

As they padded into the camp, Timberskip and Shellfur greeted them. "Nice hunt?" Mused Timberskip, eyeing the vole Robinfire was carrying. The she-cat nodded and dropped the animal.

"Want it?" She asked, eyes glinting with amusement. "I know vole is your favorite." Timberskip licked his lips hungrily and nodded, snatching the vole in his jaws.

"Thank you," he mumbled, his words muffled by the prey in his mouth. "Come on, Shellfur, we have to sort the marigold and comfrey."

"Coming," meowed the spotted tom as she grabbed a mouse and hurried after his mentor, eyes flashing with playfulness as they disappeared into the medicine cat den.

Nightshrike headed for the fresh-kill pile, which was decently stocked considering Leafbare was in full swing. After dropping off her prey, she looked around for Thorntail. Instead, Larkflight trotted up to her, eyes gleaming with excitement. "What's got your tail in a twist?" She teased.

Larkflight nipped her ear playfully and shook out his fur. "Whiteblaze went to Timberskip and Shellfur when she woke up and found out some amazing news!"

Nightshrike nodded. "What was it?" She pressed, tail flicking as she studied the rather eager tom.

"She's expecting my kits!" He cried, grinning from ear to ear. "I can't wait! I'm going to be a father!" Nightshrike smiled half-heartedly. *Will Thorntail and I ever have kits?* Her dream shot to her mind, making her flush. *Will it ever become true?*

"That's great, Larkflight," purred Stormbird as she and Robinfire trotted up to the pair. "I'm sure Whiteblaze is just as excited as you are."

"Maybe even more so to get the kits out of her." Added Robinfire, sharing an amused glance with Nightshrike. "How far along is she?" She asked, looking at Larkflight.

"About half a moon," replied the tom, about ready to burst with happiness. "Can you believe it? There'll be little versions of me and Whiteblaze running all around here in a moon and a half!"

"I can't wait for new kits, honestly." Admitted Robinfire, sitting down. "As much as Leafkit and Jaykit are great to have around, they don't have any other playmates than each other."

"When I was in the nursery as a kit," Stormbird mewed. "I had Shellfur, Larkflight, Otterfire, Petalfire, Robinfire, Sparrowflower, and Thornbite as playmates." She let out a long sigh. "I can't imagine how lonely only having your sibling to talk to in the nursery."

Robinfire flicked Stormbird on the shoulder with her tail, eyes glinting. "Don't worry, at least you have me to rant to." She teased and Nightshrike saw Stormbird's cheek flush.

"Sadly," purred the dark gray tabby she-cat. Robinfire whined in fake pain and Stormbird rubbed her cheek against hers. "But I love you."

Nightshrike gagged as they started to argue about who loved who more and she turned away, head shaking. She saw Halfsnow and Dewpath with Fennelfur and her kits talking by the nursery and the thought crossed her mind yet again. *Will I ever have a family with Thorntail?*

Chapter Thirty-One

Nightshrike flicked her tail as she waited for Thorntail to exit the medicine cat den, paws shuffling. He'd gone inside for a second, promising her they would go on a hunting trip alone, but he started to cough and that made Nightshrike tense in pure fear.

She could hear murmuring from inside the den, what was going on? Was Thorntail okay? Deciding to see what was going on, Nightshrike poked her head inside the den. "Everything okay?" She asked, looking at Timberskip and Shellfur as they stood over Thorntail's sleeping form. "Is he alright?"

Timberskip looked over his shoulder while Shellfur slid by and began to gather a jawful of herbs. "He's got whitecough, Nightshrike." The tom meowed and Nightshrike tensed her shoulders. "If we don't treat it quickly, it'll have a chance to turn into greencough."

Nightshrike could scarcely breathe for a moment. "And if it does evolve into greencough?" She whispered, tail flicking.

Shellfur twitched his ear. "Then he'll get worse and worse without catmint. If he does and we don't have the precious herb, he'll join StarClan faster than we can blink."

Nightshrike felt nauseous at the thought of Thorntail dying and she stumbled. "Y-you'd better make sure he survives." She whispered and met Timberskip's soft yellow gaze.

"We'll do what we can, Nightshrike." He meowed uncertainly and turned away, shuffling through stacks of herbs. Unable to bear the sight of her sick lover, Nightshrike hurried out of the den, tail streaming after her. She darted into the clearing, vision blurred with fear and worry for Thorntail. *What if he doesn't make it?* Her head swam with so many dark thoughts. *I live without him!*

"Nightshrike?" Robinfire's worried mew sounded far away. "Are you

okay?" Nightshrike felt fur brush against her side as Robinfire sat down next to her. "What's the matter?"

"Is it Thorntail?" Asked the voice of Larkflight. "Did you guys have an argument?"

"Larkflight!" Stormbird's scold made Nightshrike look up to see Larkflight cringing away from the gray tabby. "Don't say that!"

"W-we didn't have an argument," Nightshrike's voice was small and fearful, making her curl her claws into the ground in disgust. *Warriors fear nothing.* "But, Thorntail has whitecough."

The silence between the four cats made Nightshrike squirm, tail curling around herself for comfort. Stormbird and Robinfire shared worried glances while Larkflight looked at his paws, ears flattened. "What?" She meowed, looking at her friends.

"Well," Robinfire meowed but Stormbird flicked her tail over her mouth quickly, shooting her a glare. Robinfire seemed to get the message as she directed their attention to Leafkit and Jaykit. "Would you look at that! Leafkit and Jaykit are learning how to pounce!"

Nightshrike narrowed her eyes and lashed her tail, abrubtly rising to her paws and beginning to walk away. "I'd better get on a patrol," she meowed over her shoulder as she padded towards Echospeck, who was organizing the next couple patrols. "Can I join a border patrol?" She asked, twitching her tail to where Leopardcoat, Sparrowflower, Shadeheart, and Lichenstorm were standing at the camp entrance.

Echospeck turned to her, surprise flashing in her blue eyes. She let out a purr and nodded. "Go join Shadeheart's patrol. I believe they're heading for the NightClan border. I'm sure they wouldn't mind you joining."

Nightshrike nodded and dipped her head, heading for the four warriors were standing. "Echospeck told me to join your patrol," she meowed as she neared them.

Shadeheart nodded. "Let's go, then," she meowed and kinked her tail to the camp entrance. She trotted out of the camp, her patrol following in suit as they left the safety of the camp walls.

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As Nightshrike followed her Clanmates through the Whispering Fields, unease made her fur prickle. She had never seen a NightClan patrol in her life, let alone one that could tear her to shreds in a heartbeat. Shaking out her fur and hopefully her worries, Nightshrike trudged on.

As they neared what looked like the border, Shadeheart froze without warning. "Stop," she whispered, tail erect and flicking. "Get down."

Nightshrike crouched awkwardly next to Lichenstorm and Leopardcoat, watching as Shadeheart sat perfectly still as though she were a stone. Then she heard the voices coming from their side of the border. They got closer and closer until Nightshrike had to flatten her ears from the noise of loud talking.

"DawnClan better have a good excuse for what they did last moon," growled a rather deep voice that startled Nightshrike slightly. "First they steal our prey and kill one of our warriors out of spite."

A lighter voice spoke this time. "Don't be so mean, Snakefang. They didn't mean to kill Toadtail, you know that."

Nightshrike saw Shadeheart flick the tip of her tail and she nodded, shifting to the right and flanking the right of a calico she-cat with blue eyes. *Cloverheart.* She knew the name instantly. *I remember some of my former Clanmates throwing that name around often. She sounded fierce at the time but maybe she's just soft like a kittypet.*

As Nightshrike unsheathed her claws, a yowl split the air and she surged forwards, tackling Cloverheart and locking eyes with her. A cruel smile worked its way to her lips and she bit down on Cloverheart's paw, pleased at the shriek of pain that followed.

Claws slashed across her cheek and Nightshrike hissed, throwing

her opponent to the ground and snapping at her tail. When her jaws clamped around a sleek tail, Nightshrike dug her claws into the ground and pulled with all her might. Cloverheart let out a yowl as she was tossed into the nearest thorn bush, wailing as she was impaled by thorns.

Nightshrike watched with pleasure as Cloverheart tried to free herself from her prickly prison. *That's right, Nightshrike.* Purred the voice, soft and malicious. *Make them suffer. Take your anger out on them.* Without a moment's hesitation, Nightshrike whirled around on her heels and bounded towards a brown she-cat that was snarling at Lichenstorm. Within a few bounds, she was locked in battle with the she-cat.

"You're an OakClan cat!" The warrior snarled, sinking her claws into Nightshrike's side. "This is not your battle!"

Nightshrike reared on her hind legs and slashed her face, a grin plastered on her face as she watched the blood spray the forest floor. "I was sentenced to exile," she smirked as she saw shock on her enemy's face. "I murdered Tawnywillow in hopes of becoming deputy, but that failed. Guess it's time to kill you, though." With a leap, Nightshrike sank her teeth into Brownfoot's neck, blood pouring into her mouth, bitter and sweet at the same time.

Brownfoot gasped and fell to the ground, Nightshrike still hanging on. Once she was still, Nightshrike let go and glared at her body, a cold satisfaction rising in her body and seeping into the ground as the battle ended and victory was theirs.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Clearstar yowled and Nightshrike lifted her head from her sparrow, a mouthful of the prey in her mouth. She chewed quickly and swallowed, leaving her half-eaten meal behind to sit between Pebblewhisker and Shadeheart. As she looked over to the medicine cat den where Thorntail was still sick, she saw Leafkit and Jaykit sitting side by side, eyes gleaming. *They're being made apprentices.* She guessed, turning her attention back to her leader.

"We have two kits among us who have reached their third moon and are ready to become apprentices." Clearstar paused to cough which made the cats around Nightshrike tense. "Come forward, kits."

Nightshrike watched Fennelfur push her kits forward with gleaming eyes. Leafkit and Jaykit padded towards Clearstar, heads held high and tails sticking straight up in the air. The leader leaped down from the Jagged Stone and turned to his Clan, eyes glinting with pride, though they were glossed over.

"Jaykit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Jaypaw." Clearstar nodded to the apprentice and flicked his tail. "Goldenpatch, you are a strong and fierce warrior and I know you will pass on those traits onto Jaypaw."

"I will, Clearstar," came the honey-like reply of the tom as he padded towards his apprentice and touched noses with the smaller tom.

Clearstar went on. "Leafkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Leafpaw." The leader looked around, his gaze falling on Nightshrike. "Nightshrike, you are a skilled fighter and a talented hunter and I know you will pass those traits onto Leafpaw."

Nightshrike nodded and rose to her paws, padding towards her apprentice, who seemed to burst from excitement. As they touched noses, Clearstar cleared his throat. Nightshrike steered her new apprentice towards the crowd and sat down, watching Clearstar closely.

"I also must make an announcement that saddens me deeply," the tom looked over at a certain cat that Nightshrike saw was Echospeck. "Echospeck, come forward."

The she-cat looked solemn as she padded towards the leader, eyes misting and shallow. "Yes, Clearstar." She meowed, voice cracking.

"I, Clearstar, leader of DawnClan renounce your position as Clan deputy." The tom's words were met with gasps of pure shock and horror from the Clan. "Echospeck, tell the Clan what you have done."

As Clearstar stepped back, Echospeck walked closer. "DawnClan, I have no regrets for what I have done and what you are about to hear is the result of me simply falling in love." She paused, her tone growing stronger. "I am expecting kits," her eyes fluttered around the Clan, landing on one cat in particular. Timberskip's eyes were supportive and he had a grin on his face.

Nightshrike couldn't help but feel her fur prickle with unease as she gazed at the medicine cat. Shellfur was staring at Timberskip with wide green eyes. *Even he didn't know about their sudden affair.* She thought and looked up at Clearstar. The leader's eyes were narrowed as he looked at Timberskip and Echospeck, white paws shifting closer together.

"When these kits are born, I will not treat them differently than any other litter of kits that a queen has given birth to," Shellfur spoke up, breaking the silence. "Even though the birth of these kits are against the Medicine Cat Code, they will be cherished and raised as kits are."

Nightshrike flicked her tail over her paws, rocking back and forth. Clearstar cleared his throat and grasped the attention of his Clan once more. His shoulders were tense and his tail lashed back and

forth like a snake.

"Meeting dismissed," was all the leader had to say before turning away and padding towards his den. Nightshrike let out a breath she didn't know she was holding in and turned to Leafpaw, who was looking at her.

"What do we do now?" Her apprentice asked, trembling with excitement as she stole glances at the camp entrance. *She wants to tour the territory.* Nightshrike looked over at the medicine cat den. *But that won't happen just yet.*

"You will be cleaning the nursery with Jaypaw before you do anything exciting." Nightshrike saw the excitement drain from Leafpaw's face as she spoke. "When you're done with that, change Hollowstream's bedding and come find me." With a swift nod to Leafpaw, Nightshrike headed for the fresh-kill pile, snatched a squirrel, and headed for Timberskip's den.

As she pushed through the vines that dangled down from the top of the den, Nightshrike immediately smelled the rancid scent of sickness from three nests. Since Thorntail had come down with whitecough, Pebblewhisker and Lichenstorm had joined him with their own cases of illness.

She forced her way through the gross stench of sickness and made her way to Thorntail's nest. Without letting out a breath, she dropped the squirrel at his muzzle and quickly darted out of the den, gasping for air.

Shaking out her fur, Nightshrike scanned the camp and saw Larkflight, Whiteblaze, and Dewpath speaking with each other, tails twitching. Nightshrike trotted towards them, sitting down beside Dewpath. "What's going on?" She asked.

"We're discussing who will take Echospeck's place as deputy," answered Larkflight as he sat next to Whiteblaze, their fur brushing.

"Who do you think will?" Queried Nightshrike, curious to know what some of the others thought. Personally, she wanted to become deputy. *If you do, then you are next in line to becoming leader.*

Reminded the voice. *And when you are leader, you can finally destroy OakClan and GlacierClan. Just like you wanted.*

Dewpath shrugged. "I feel like Thorntail deserves the role more than any of us." He meowed earnestly. "If I was leader and he wasn't sick, I would've made him deputy seasons ago."

"Did he ever have an apprentice?" Nightshrike asked, looking at the tom.

Whiteblaze flicked her tail. "Who cares?" She meowed boldly, surprising the three cats. "Thorntail is one of the Clan's senior warriors and he's very proud and respected. If Clearstar doesn't make someone like that as deputy, I'd think he was crazy."

Larkflight frowned at his mate, who shifted her paws. "Halfsnow is the oldest senior warrior and trained me," he meowed. "She could be a great deputy and an even better leader."

A snort from a nearby cat made the four cats turn their heads to see Thornbite and Fennelfur padding towards them. "Halfsnow is more strict than you may see," meowed Thornbite. "She was hard on me when I was a kit up to when I became a warrior."

Fennelfur nodded. "Ever since I became an apprentice, Halfsnow pushed me to be the best apprentice in training. Even when I became a warrior, she always hovered and would tell me to go on more patrols and keep hunting."

Dewpath pressed against her, rasping his tongue over her ears. "From what I've heard, Halfsnow is controlling." He meowed, ear twitching as he looked at Whiteblaze, Larkflight, and Nightshrike.

"It got worse when I was expecting Leafpaw and Jaypaw." Fennelfur whimpered, snuggling closer to Dewpath. "She kept telling me that I wasn't old enough to be a mother. She told me that I needed more experience to be a decent mother to my kits."

Nightshrike felt her fur bristle. *What has Halfsnow done to these cats?*

Chapter Thirty-Three

Nightshrike watched Leafpaw crouch down, already seeing errors in her sloppy attempt at a hunting crouch. "What is *that*?" She snorted and jabbed her apprentice's paws in a wider stance. "Keep your paws out," she instructed and put a paw on her back and pressed down. "Stay low to the ground so your prey doesn't see you." Nightshrike looked at her apprentice's tail, which flicked back and forth in the air. "And keep your tail just above the ground."

Leafpaw let out a groan and glared boredly over at her mentor. "We've been doing this since the ceremony!" She complained and bounced towards her mentor, eyes glinting. "Why can't we go on a patrol to one of the borders?"

Nightshrike fixed her apprentice with a stern look and watched as her ears fell. "We don't know when Clearstar will call a Clan meeting to announce the new deputy." She flicked her tail. "But I suppose we could go on a little hunting trip before we head back to camp." Leafpaw's eyes lit up and Nightshrike let out a small smile. "Come on, you munchkin, let's go before I change my mind."

"Woohoo!" Cheered Leafpaw as she leaped into the air, making Nightshrike laugh. "Come on, Nightshrike! I'll catch more prey than you will!"

"Not if you keep yelling like that!" Nightshrike retorted and chased after her apprentice, tail slashing the air as she raced after Leafpaw.

Fallen leaves kicked up behind them as they ran down a small hill and Leafpaw looked over her shoulder to see Nightshrike standing at the top, her fur creating a distinct silhouette. Nightshrike heard Leafpaw laughing and she couldn't help but break into a smile. *This is the most freeing I've felt since I became Halfthroat's apprentice.* She realized as she crouched down and sprinted down the hill.

Leafpaw watched as a leaf fell from a nearby oak tree and didn't notice her mentor hurling towards her. As her head turned,

Nightshrike tackled her and together they rolled in the grass.

"Hey!" A voice made the pair freeze. "What are you two doing this far from the border?" Nightshrike shot to her paws and strained her eyes to see a lithe silver tabby she-cat stalking towards them with wary clear in her eyes. Something about her made Nightshrike frown in confusion but when she saw the she-cat's companions, she stepped in front of Leafpaw, who was trembling.

"You have no bussiness being here," she growled, tail flicking around her apprentice. As she glared at the cats, she hissed to Leafpaw. "Run back to camp and get backup."

Leafpaw stared at her in horror and shook her head. "I-I'm staying," she meowed, her voice trembling.

"You're fresh out of the nursery with no battle training whatsoever," Nightshrike shook her head, curling her lip as they began to get close. "They'll rip you to shreds before you can even unsheathe your claws. Now go!"

"Wait a minute," a meow from the enemy's ranks made Leafpaw prick her ears. Nightshrike followed her eyes and saw Blackdust padding forward, eyes wide. "I-I know you."

Nightshrike lashed her tail and widened her defensive stance. "I suppose I should say the same?" She growled scathingly and saw pain flash in his eyes. "Don't try anything stupid, Blackdust. Or I'll tear you apart."

The silver tabby she-cat leaped forward to the tom's side, hissing. "How dare you speak to my leader that way!" She arched her back and Nightshrike heard a whimper of fear coming from Leafpaw. "That's no way a cat should speak to a leader."

"Blackstar," a meow from behind him made him turn his head. "That's her. That's Specklewatcher's daughter."

Nightshrike was faintly aware of Leafpaw tugging at her tail and pawsteps approaching her and her apprentice from all sides and her neck fur bristled. "What are you talking about?" She spat.

Blackstar flicked his tail and the cat who spoke padded forward. It was Snowmask, a cat Nightshrike only saw at Gatherings since OakClan didn't share a border with NightClan.

"Snowmask is right, Blackstar," meowed the silver she-cat, who reluctantly sheathed her claws. "That's Nightkit."

Nightshrike snarled. "It's Night*shrike*!" She saw Blackstar approach her and she curled her lip. "Back off!"

"I'm not going to hurt you or your apprentice," the tom's words were filled with emotion and Nightshrike felt strangely calm as they washed over her. *He's like Thorntail. Thorntail!* As Blackstar reached out a paw, Nightshrike lashed out with her own and raked her claws across his shoulder.

Swiftly turning around, she picked Leafpaw up by the scruff and tore up the hill without looking back. *He looks so similar to me.* Nightshrike thought as she heard yowling coming from behind her. She halted at the top and looked back, tail flicking. Blackstar was watching her with his brown eyes barely in sight. *Is he related to me in some way?* She didn't dwell on it any longer before she raced away once more. This time, she didn't look back once.

Chapter Thirty-Four

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Clearstar's voice shook with tension as Nightshrike and Leafpaw left the medicine cat's den. Timberskip and Shellfur were shocked at what they had heard from Nightshrike's explanation but they gave the two some thyme and chamomile to soothe their minds.

It was nearly sunset and Clearstar most likely decided the new deputy. Nightshrike nodded to Leafpaw and padded to Larkflight, settling down next to the black tom and looked up at the leader with tense shoulders. Larkflight leaned over to her and nudged her, gesturing to the medicine den where Thorntail was lying on the ground and propped up as he watched Clearstar. He looked sick still, but he did look a bit better.

"Following Echospeck's expecting litter of kits, the role for deputy is empty and it cannot be empty any longer." Clearstar looked at the cats beneath him, tail flicking behind him. "The new deputy of DawnClan will be Nightshrike."

The entire world froze around Nightshrike as Larkflight turned to her, eyes wide and shocked. She stared up at her leader in complete shock and surprise. When Clearstar nodded and jerked his muzzle, Nightshrike rose to her paws and strode towards the tom. She felt eyes following her as she stood next to Clearstar, expectant and encouraging.

Nightshrike looked over at where Thorntail was grinning at her and gulped. "I-I would be lying if I said I expected this." She meowed nervously but went on nonetheless. "I will never be half the deputy Echospeck was but I vow to serve DawnClan to the best of my ability."

"Nightshrike! Nightshrike! Nightshrike!" Cheered Leafpaw and Thorntail who were joined in by the rest of the Clan.

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Nightshrike groggily opened her eyes, the sky still dark and cloudy as rain pelted down on the camp. Her nest was as warm as could be and she let out a small sigh. Reluctantly, the new deputy rose to her paws and picked her way out of the warrior's den. Her fur was soaked by the time she reached the center of the clearing. Shaking out her pelt, she sat down and simply waited.

The rain was annoying but she didn't bother trying to get to shelter while she was drenched and already wide awake. The clouds were dark and almost black as the storm raged on. After a few moments of waiting, Nightshrike rose to her paws and padded towards the fresh-kill pile and looked at the ruined prey. With a sigh, she took what was left. Two mice and a vole used to be enough to feed kits and one of the queens during Greenleaf but in Leafbare, it'd only feed maybe the kits and one other cat.

"You're up rather early," commented a voice and Nightshrike jumped. Timberskip padded towards her and sat down next to her, his fur dripping wet.

"The early bird catches the worm," Nightshrike smoothed her fur. She glanced at the sky, which was turning pale as the sun began to rise. "What can I help you with, Timberskip?"

The medicine let out a dry laugh despite the moist morning. "You're going to get sick if you're out here much longer." He meowed, nodding to her fur. "The longer you wait, the sicker you'll get."

Nightshrike shrugged her soggy shoulders. "You could get sick too," she pointed out. "You aren't exactly immune to sickness." Timberskip scoffed.

"The Clan needs a deputy more than two medicine cats." Nightshrike narrowed her eyes and looked away, neck fur bristling slightly. Suddenly, Timberskip's tone softened. "Nightshrike, why are you really out here?"

"To think," she replied tensely, tail flicking over her front paws to hide her unsheathed claws. Nightshrike caught Timberskip's eye

and narrowed her own.

The medicine cat didn't speak for a moment but when he did, it chilled Nightshrike down to the bone. "You were there at the Moonpool when the other medicine cats were killed, weren't you?"

Nightshrike scoffed and glared at the tom. "Of course not!" She defended herself. *He knows I'm lying.* "I was curled in my nest in the apprentice's den."

Timberskip thrusted his muzzle close to hers, making her let out a low hiss. "Then why do you all of a sudden get defensive? You killed one of the most precious cats in a Clan. Tell me, why did you do it? Which innocent cat did you slaughter for no rhyme or reason other than throwing the Clans into total chaos?"

Timberskip's eyes were intense and dangerous, making Nightshrike uncomfortable. "We had a plan to cause chaos for reasons that are unknown to me." She growled through gritted teeth. "I'm pretty sure you know who I killed that night. Blackheart's blood was salty and bitter, just how every cat's blood should taste." Timberskip's eyes widened and she went on. "He wasn't the first cat I've killed, and he wasn't the last. Why do you think I randomly joined DawnClan? I was exiled for the murder of the former deputy, Tawnywillow. The border scuffle the other day? I killed Brownfoot out of pure anger." She took a few threatening steps towards the tom, who backed away. "And I'll kill again and again and again until every cat in OakClan and GlacierClan is bloody beneath my paws."

"You're insane," breathed Timberskip, eyes glazed with fear. Nightshrike chuckled and raised her head, staring right into his yellow eyes.

"Perhaps, or maybe I just have my priorities in order." She meowed silkily and slid under the tom with her tail curling around his muzzle. "Run along, medicine cat, or you'll be the one I kill next."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Nightshrike watched as Leopardcoat, Halfsnow, and Tumblewatcher padded up to her. "Greetings, you three. Wanting to join a patrol?" She asked.

Tumblewatcher nodded. "We wanted to go hunting since the prey was ruined by the storm this morning." He meowed, angling his ears to the empty pile where the prey used to lay. "We can mark the OakClan border while we're out if you'd like."

The deputy nodded and pointed her tail to Leopardcoat. "You can lead them." She meowed. "Take Jaypaw and Goldenpatch with you. The more prey the better."

Halfsnow opened her mouth. "What about Leafpaw?" She asked, motioning to the apprentice den. "Should we take her with us so she can see the border and hunt?" Her tone was tense and Nightshrike shook her head.

"I'll be taking her out for some hunting practice and then some battle training." She meowed, leaving no more room for argument. Halfsnow got the message and simply nodded. "Off you go," the deputy meowed and turned away.

"Nightshrike!" A friendly call from Larkflight made her turn her head to see her friend waving his paw. "Come over here!" Poppybee and Robinfire were laughing about something and Nightshrike's curiosity got the best of her and she padded over.

"What's up?" She asked and flicked her tail. "I've got patrols to organize." Nightshrike sat down and looked expectantly at Larkflight, who was giggling like a kit.

"Y-you should've s-seen the look T-Tumblewatcher gave you!" Laughed Larkflight as he fell on his back, cackling with laughter. Nightshrike tipped her head to one side, amused at how her friends were acting.

"What look did he give me?" She asked, holding back and laugh as Larkflight snorted. "What am I missing?"

"Tumblewatcher obviously likes you, Nightshrike!" Robinfire exploded in laughter, as did Poppybee. "Haven't you noticed?"

Nightshrike blinked at her friends, appalled and pleased. She shook her head and stood up. "I'd better go get a border patrol out so we can feel a bit safer." She paused, looking at Larkflight. "In fact, why don't you three go? Larkflight'll lead it. No distractions." She meowed sternly.

"Yes, ma'am." Teased Larkflight as he caught his breath and stood up, tail flicking in the air. "Let's go, you two. We haven't got a moment to lose!"

"Bring back some prey while you're out!" She called as they started to leave. Nightshrike shook her head and chuckled. "What has my life come to?"

As Nightshrike padded towards the medicine cat den, Leafpaw bounded up to her. "What are we going to do today?" Her apprentice asked, the events of the previous day forgotten. "Hunting? Fighting? Exploring?"

"Slow down," meowed Nightshrike as she flicked her tail across Leafpaw's mouth. "Right now, you will be checking on Hollowstream and helping around the camp. After that, we'll work on hunting and move on to battle practice." Leafpaw's eyes lit up. "Go on, I'll find you when sunhigh comes."

"Okay!" Chirped her apprentice as she scurried off to the elder's den. Nightshrike chuckled to herself and padded into the medicine cat den. Her heart grew heavy as she saw Thorntail's shape sleeping alone in a nest in the corner of the den.

"He's gotten worse since yesterday, Nightshrike." Meowed Shellfur as he rose to his paws and shook out his fluffy fur. His eyes were sad and sympathetic as he padded quietly towards her. "His whitecough turned into greencough overnight, he may not survive the end of Leafbare."

Nightshrike's breath caught in her throat and she looked at Shellfur, who dipped his head and turned away. *Thorntail's dying!* Nightshrike stepped on the tom's tail, making him turn his head over his shoulder. "Heal him," she growled, her voice cold and wavering. "Please heal him."

Shellfur blinked slowly at her. "We're doing our best, Nightshrike. Sometimes, it isn't enough." Nightshrike felt anger flare to life in her belly.

"Then try *harder!*" She snapped and watched as his eyes glinted with shock. "Don't stop until you know he's going to live." Without another word, she shoved by the tom and stormed out of the den.

"Nightshrike!" The voice of her leader made her tense and she turned her head as Clearstar bounded towards her. "There you are."

Nightshrike dipped her head. "What's the matter, Clearstar?" She asked. "Is something wrong with Echospeck or Hollowstream?"

Clearstar shook his broad head. "Certainly not, Nightshrike." He meowed and twitched his tail. "However, the Gathering is tonight and I'm not sure who to pick." He sat down and Nightshrike tipped her head.

"What about Halfsnow, Shellfur, Leopardcoat, Tumblewatcher, Poppybee, Sparrowflower, Stormbird, Sparrowshadow, Thornbite, Dewpath, Goldenpatch, Leafpaw, Jaypaw, and Echospeck?" She asked, tail flicking.

Clearstar was silent for a brief moment before breaking into a purr. "Sounds wonderful," he looked warmly at the she-cat. "This is why I chose you as my deputy." He rose to his paws and dipped his head. "Good day, Nightshrike." He purred and turned away towards the warrior's den.

As he left, Nightshrike heard yowling and screeches of pain coming towards the camp and she whipped around just in time to see Tumblewatcher's black and white pelt splashed with blood burst through the camp entrance, panting.

"Nightshrike!" He gasped, hobbling towards her only to stagger. Nightshrike rushed towards the tom and supported him, looking at his face, concerned.

"Tumblewatcher, what happened?" She asked, feeling the warrior trembling next to her. "Where's the rest of your patrol?"

"The OakClan border," he breathlessly meowed. "A patrol attacked us as we were leaving. Th-they killed Jaypaw but the others are still fighting and not winning." Tumblewatcher's eyes rolled in the back of his head and he fell to the ground as blood pooled around him.

"Timberskip! Shellfur!" Nightshrike yowled and turned her head. "Sparrowflower, Sparrowshadow, Birdwatcher, Stormbird, Thornbite, Dewpath, Shadeheart, and Pebblewhisker! Let's go!" She didn't wait for the other cats to catch up as she sprinted out of the camp and towards the OakClan border. The wind slashed her face relentlessly and she ran faster towards the sound of battle.

It wasn't long until she came to a stop and saw the body of Jaypaw a few tail-lengths away. Just a mouse-length away from his body was Goldenpatch wrestling with Frostgaze. With her claws unsheathing, she let out a yell and hurled herself at the she-cat.

Leaping, she tackled the brown tabby warrior off her Clanmate and snarled at her. "Get off him, you mange-pelt!" Frostgaze stared at her for a moment before hissing.

"Nightshrike," her tone was threatening and she launched herself at the black she-cat. "I'll flay you alive!" Frostgaze slashed Nightshrike's cheek and the deputy snapped at her paw.

"I'd like to see you try!" Retorted Nightshrike and she bunched her hind legs and sprang at Frostgaze. Her front paws slammed into her chest and she pinned the she-cat to the ground. Claws sank into her shoulders and Nightshrike hissed in pain. Lifting her paw, she clawed Frostgaze's head.

Her former Clanmate let out a low growl and slashed at Nightshrike's ears, making blood drip onto her brown pelt. Nightshrike felt claws sink into her belly and she was pushed off.

She watched Frostgaze glare at her before scrambling away and across the border. She scanned the battlefield and saw Dewpath getting his son's small body on his back and fleeing into the ferns while Sparrowflower and Shadeheart fought with Swiftsoul and Volepelt.

Nightshrike's bloody ear twitched and she saw Voletuft and Stormbird circling each other. She narrowed her eyes and bounded towards them, her tail lashing.

Voletuft was the first to notice her. "Nightshrike!" She gasped and narrowly avoided Stormbird's claws as she lashed out a paw. "I thought you were dead!"

Nightshrike narrowed her eyes and jerked her muzzle to the battling cats. Stormbird looked hesitant but nodded and hurried away to help her Clanmates. "You were wrong, *mother*." Voletuft flinched as she heard the amount of venom and hatred in her opponent's meow. "Or should I call you that after what you did to me?"

Voletuft got out of her position and regarded her adoptive daughter. "I took care of you when no cat wanted to." She meowed. "Your real mother died giving birth to you and your siblings. Blackheart couldn't reveal his secret to the Clan and if he did, he would have stopped being a medicine cat."

Nightshrike snarled. "So my so-called father wanted his position more than he wanted his daughter." Voletuft narrowed her eyes and Nightshrike prepared herself to leap at her. "How selfish!" With a yowl, she sprang at Voletuft and slammed into her. "I'll kill you!" Voletuft leaped to the side, just avoiding Nightshrike's sharp claws. She let out a long hiss and lashed her tail. "Come on," she taunted. "Don't you want to play? I promise I'll play nice!"

Voletuft let out a short hiss as Nightshrike clawed her flank. "I'll never play with a murderer like you!" She lashed out with a paw and caught Nightshrike's side, blood welling from the blow. "First you kill Blackheart, then Tawnywillow! Who's next, Nightshrike?"

Nightshrike let out a cruel laugh and saw fear swell in Voletuft's

eyes. "Every cat that stands in my way of destroying OakClan and GlacierClan!" She shrieked and leaped at the she-cat and sank her teeth into her neck. "Farewell, *mother*, say hello to Gorsewhisper and my parents for me in StarClan!" With a final lunge, Nightshrike pierced her teeth into Voletuft's throat and latched on. The she-cat yowled but it ended in a gurgling sound that was like birdsong to Nightshrike's ears as her caretaker's light died from her eyes.

Around her, the sounds of battle decreased as the OakClan cats fled and the DawnClan warriors cheered victoriously. Nightshrike lifted her head and smiled down at Voletuft's unmoving body. "I will not end my reign until every last one of you is dead, mother." She smirked and turned away, blood dripping from her chin. "You can be sure of that."

Chapter Thirty-Six

"Cats of all Clans!" Meowed Spiderstar as he perched on the stone only used by leaders. "Let this moon's Gathering begin!" The conversations around Nightshrike hushed and the cats turned their attention to the leaders. Among the deputies was Sparrowsong, GlacierClan's new deputy since Snowstar died, Vixenpool from OakClan, and Eeltail from NightClan. *Funny,* thought Nightshrike, *how two cats who are barely popular in their own Clan can become deputy.* "I will start us off," Spiderstar went on and Nightshrike tensed as Vixenpool glared at her. "We mourn the death of one of our beloved warriors, Voletuft. She was killed in battle and her spirit rests in StarClan." A moment of silence was held for the fallen she-cat. Nightshrike held back a snort as Vixenpool's eyes flashed with sadness. "Our deputy, Halfthroat, also died and his spirit rests somewhere else. In the wake of his death, Vixenpool has been named as OakClan's new deputy."

"Vixenpool! Vixenpool! Vixenpool!" Called the cats from below as the new deputy straightened, drinking it all in whilst Nightshrike scoffed and leaned over to Sparrowsong.

"If she was any prouder, I'd be afraid of her exploding." She snickered and Sparrowsong smirked and whispered.

"She'd better watch out before all that pride gets shut down." Sparrowsong's eyes danced with amusement and Nightshrike giggled and turned her attention back to the leaders. Spiderstar was bowing his head and in his place stood Swiftstar.

"It is with great sadness that I announce the death of Snowstar, who died peacefully in her sleep early this moon." Swiftstar meowed and silence haunted the clearing. "I received my nine lives from StarClan and my name is now Swiftstar. For my deputy, I chose Sparrowsong."

"Sparrowsong! Swiftstar! Sparrowsong! Swiftstar!" Chanted the cats from below. However, Nightshrike noticed, the NightClan cats were

shifting uncomfortably and Blackstar, Eeltail, and a few others were speaking quietly amongst each other.

Clearstar stepped forward. "DawnClan is doing well but we mourn the loss of our apprentice, Jaypaw, who was mercilessly slaughtered in a border scuffle with OakClan."

"'Border scuffle' says the prey-stealers!" Spat Scorchtail from her spot next to Flightclaw and Owlflight. She leaped to her paws and glared at Nightshrike and Clearstar. "Your patrol stole OakClan prey!"

"We did not!" Yelled a furious Sparrowflower, tail lashing as she rose to her paws. Nightshrike caught a glimpse of her unsheathed claws and grew interested in the she-cat's demeanor. "One of your squirrel-brained apprentices crossed the border and stole prey!"

Redstripe hissed. "Lakepaw is *not* squirrel-brained!" He lashed his tail and glared at the she-cat. Stormbird and Dewpath flanked Sparrowflower, hissing, and spitting. "Moreover, *you* tried to claw his fur off!"

Clearstar's eyes grew worried. "Settle down!" He meowed loudly but no cat seemed to listen to the tom. Nightshrike said nothing, just watched to see what her Clanmates may do.

Sparrowflower stalked towards the tom, who was accompanied by Scorchtail and Flightclaw. "*You're* the ones who killed an apprentice who was *three days* into his training!"

Redstripe let out a low growl and unsheathed his claws. He narrowed his eyes and his lips drew back into a snarl. "The cat responsible for the kit's death is not me." He growled.

"That *kit* was my son!" Yowled Dewpath as he rushed forward and thrust his muzzle close to Redstripe's. The tom's eyes glittered with anger and agony that his son was gone. *I wonder if a fight will break out.* Nightshrike looked at the moon, which was untouched by the gray clouds. *Maybe this was supposed to happen.* "You are a disgrace to your Clan! You would shed the blood of a cat barely out of the nursery and for what? A piece of prey that would fill two bellies at

the most? Have you no honor and no knowledge of mercy?"

Scorchtail let out a growl. "*We're* not the cats who killed him." She sniffed and pointed her nose to the sky, her eyes gleaming.

Dewpath glared at her. "He's still dead! Now he will never get his warrior name or walk the path he wanted since he was at the curve of Fennelfur's belly. He dreamt of the days he would be a warrior and now thanks to one of your Clanmates that *had* to take a fight too far, he will forever have 'paw' in his name!" Scorchtail flinched and looked at Redstripe, who snarled.

"You do not want this, Dewpath." The ginger and white tom warned, stepping closer to the furious DawnClan warrior. "The blood of your son has already been shed, as have the blood of my Clanmates. Is this really a cause worth fighting for?"

Dewpath didn't answer him with words. Instead, he let out a yowl and lashed out with a paw of unsheathed claws and slashed Redstripe's muzzle. Blood sprayed the ground and Redstripe staggered, blood dripping from his muzzle. Dewpath glared at him and watched as the tom sprang, tackling Dewpath. The two toms rolled in a ball of claws and flying tufts of fur.

"Stop them!" Shouted a panicked Swiftstar from next to Blackstar, who watched in shock and awe. Clearstar was frozen in his place, eyes wide and fogged. When he was nudged by Swiftstar, he barely reacted.

Nightshrike glanced at the other deputies and leaped off the stone and rushed through the throng of cats to get to her Clanmate. "Dewpath!" She shouted and eventually made it to the two fighting cats. Dewpath had a strong hold on Redstripe's shoulders and the other tom had his scruff fastened between his teeth.

"Redstripe!" Vixenpool's voice had an edge to it as she brushed passed Nightshrke. "Get off him!" As she spoke, she leaped at the ginger tom and tore him off Dewpath. Nightshrike rushed forward and pulled Dewpath away from Redstripe by the tail while Sparrowsong had his scruff. As Nightshrike looked at Vixenpool and Redstripe, she saw Eeltail in front of Redstripe.

As Nightshrike peered passed them, she noticed a distinct yellow pelt behind a group of NightClan warriors. *What's he doing here?* She couldn't think about that, though. Dewpath was struggling to get free and leap at Redstripe, who was calming down with some nasty wounds.

"This Gathering is at an end!" Declared Blackstar and looked at the deputies. "Go to your respective leader and leave!" Without another word, he motioned to Eeltail and together they were flanked by their Clan and disappeared.

Nightshrike heaved a sigh as GlacierClan began to leave. Redstripe glared at Dewpath, who was being scolded by Stormbird. The tom glared right back and bared his teeth, but he looked away when Stormbird nipped his ear. Nightshrike turned to Redstripe as he began to leave. "Jaypaw's death was unnecessary." She meowed, tail flicking. "You of all cats should know that."

Redstripe hissed softly and got in her face. "Blackheart and Tawnywillow's death was unnecessary too, weren't they?" Nightshrike tensed. "But that didn't stop you from killing them in cold blood." Without leaving her time to retort, Redstripe whipped around and stalked after his Clanmates.

Nightshrike shook out her fur and looked around for Clearstar, who was speaking urgently to Shellfur. She looked at Dewpath, who was limping with Stormbird towards the direction of the camp. As her Clanmates left the Gathering Hollow, a cold, bitter breeze ruffled her fur. She turned her attention to the sky, where the moon glared down at her.

Suddenly, a voice spoke from behind her and she whirled around, startled. "You know what's coming," meowed the cat. Nightshrike tilted her head and took a step back, alert. "Don't remember me, Nightshrike?" With a sharp intake of air, she recognized Voletuft's brown fur, sleek and fluffy with a distinct shine to it. "*The one born from darkness will divide and taint the Clans. The half-throated deceiver will rip one away and the Clans will never see the light of day."* Was all her adoptive mother said before disappearing in a cloud of white and leaving Nightshrike all alone.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

A screech of pain roused Nightshrike from her short, dreamless sleep. Voletuft's words from the Gathering last night haunted her, making her skip sleeping at night and pushing her harder and harder to appear the best. *If I'm part of the prophecy, I will be the one that will cause the Clans to not see the light of day again.* She thought darkly and pushed herself to her paws and forced herself out of the warrior's den. In the clearing was a pacing Timberskip, a nervous Whiteblaze, and a jumpy Leafpaw who was eagerly waiting.

Nightshrike saw Larkflight and Poppybee sharing a mouse next to where Timberskip was pacing and approached them. "Is Echospeck kitting?" She asked.

Poppybee nodded and gulped down her bite. "Timberskip's been pacing since dawn. I wonder when his paws will fall off!" She remarked and took another bite of her mouse.

"How long has she been giving birth?" Nightshrike questioned, glancing at the nursery. A strange feeling wiggled in her belly but she shook it off. *Echospeck is only providing the Clan with more mouths to feed and eager kits that are ready to learn.* She reminded herself.

"Since the Gathering," answered Larkflight, who was looking nervously to the den. "When we came back, she was complaining about pains in her stomach and Timberskip ran about screaming that she was giving birth." He paused. "Turns out, he was right."

"How many kits have been born so far?" Nightshrike sat down, tail twitching as she looked at the black tom.

"To my knowledge, two, but there's more on the way." Larkflight meowed and rose to his paws and stretched. "I'm going hunting, want to join me?" He asked, looking at Nightshrike and Poppybee.

Nightshrike shook her head and got to her paws. "Since Leafpaw couldn't train yesterday, we'll be battle training until sunhigh. Then,

we'll be hunting." She meowed and flicked her ear. "Perhaps you could take Birdwatcher, Tumblewatcher, Pebblewhisker, and Fennelfur with you?"

Larkflight nodded. "Of course," he meowed. "I'll take Poppybee with me as well." He snickered and nudged the pale tabby she-cat, who jerked and fixed him with a confused look. "Let's go get the others."

As they padded away, Nightshrike headed for Leafpaw. "Leafpaw," her apprentice jumped, startled. She relaxed when she saw it was only her mentor. Nightshrike cleared her throat. "We're going to battle train, let's go." She said nothing more and turned away, already heading for the camp entrance.

"Is anyone coming with us?" Leafpaw asked, her meow small and shallow. Nightshrike glanced at her apprentice and met her light blue eyes.

"Sure," she meowed and saw her eyes light up. "You can choose who we can take with us. We'll be hunting after training anyways." Nightshrike watched as Leafpaw bounded away and went into the warrior's den. The deputy sat down and began to wash, her thoughts racing. *Why did Voletuft tell* me *a prophecy when Clearstar and Timberskip are the real cats in charge?* Her thoughts fought back. *I am the deputy, though.* She let out a long sigh and licked her paw, drawing it over her ears.

"Nightshrike!" Chirped Leafpaw's voice and Nightshrike looked up to see her apprentice and Lichenstorm padding towards her. She rose to her paws and dipped her head to the tom before setting off out of the camp with Leafpaw on her heels.

They didn't say much as they headed for a small clearing where they trained. Nightshrike didn't know what to call the place, but Empty Hollow sounded good to her. "Alright," she meowed, turning to her apprentice once they were in the middle of the clearing. "Today, we will be working on the back kick, forepaw slash, and the tail yank." She meowed and looked at Lichenstorm, who was fidgeting with a blade of dead grass. "I will demonstrate the back kick on Lichenstorm, watch closely." At Lichenstorm's nod, she darted forward and leaped into the air, soaring over her Clanmate.

Before he could turn around, she landed and kicked out with her hind legs, knocking the tom over with a grunt.

"Not bad," teased Lichenstorm as he rose to his paws. He looked at Leafpaw. "When training with your Clanmates, you want to make sure your claws are sheathed. Unsheathed claws deals wounds that can be nasty and can lead to infection. We do not want Timberskip and Shellfur wasting their herbs on training accidents."

Leafpaw nodded in understanding and looked at Nightshrike, who crouched down. Her light blue eyes narrowed in concentration and she ran at her mentor, springing into the air. Unfortunately, her leap was clumsy and she fell short and fell on her chest, gasping as the breath rushed from her lungs.

"Again," commanded Lichenstorm and Nightshrike looked at him in surprise. The tom had never been sharp during anything since Nightshrike had joined DawnClan. She shrugged and crouched down once more as Leafpaw got to her paws.

She raced at Nightshrike again, this time slipping on the dried leaves and sliding to Nightshrike's right. Leafpaw yelped as she crashed into a log and shook her head, dazed.

"Focus, Leafpaw." Nightshrike meowed, catching a dried leaf in her paw and allowing it to flutter to the ground before stomping on it. "I can see it in your eyes; you're distracted and unable to properly concentrate."

Leafpaw lowered her head and mumbled a quiet excuse before raising her head. She crouched down and so did Nightshrike. Out of nowhere, she raced at her and jumped, landing behind her mentor and Nightshrike felt her hind paws hit her rear and she fell nose over paws into the leaves.

"Was *that* better?" Huffed Leafpaw, looking more annoyed than proud. Nightshrike nodded and rose to her paws.

"I think you've got it, Leafpaw." Purred Lichenstorm and she saw Leafpaw straighten. The tom looked over and Nightshrike and crossed the clearing towards the black she-cat. "You've got leaf in

your pelt." He meowed and nipped at an orange-brown leaf and held it between his teeth. As he spat it out, Leafpaw yawned.

"For the forepaw slash," Nightshrike continued, flustered that Lichenstorm sat so close to her that their fur brushed. "You want to have your enemy right in front of you then rear on your hind legs, and bring down a paw on their face or head." She looked at Leafpaw, who seemed bored. "I will demonstrate," she turned to Lichenstorm, who was crouching down defensively. As she narrowed her eyes, she reared on her hind legs and brought her paw down on Lichenstorm's head.

The tom crumpled to the ground and broke out laughing. "Good job," he scrambled to his paws and affectionately nudged Nightshrike's shoulder. "Leafpaw," he looked to the apprentice. "You will try this move on Nightshrike and we will see how much time we have left until we go hunting."

"But Nightshrike said we'd practice the tail yank!" Complained Leafpaw and Nightshrike twitched the tip of her tail.

"Leafpaw," she silenced her apprentice, her eyes cutting wounds into Leafpaw's light blue gaze. "We need to return to camp and check on Echospeck and the kits. Besides, you need to do your apprentice duties as well." Nightshrike reminded her, seeing her tail and ears droop.

"But don't worry," Lichenstorm piped up. "Soon, you'll be a warrior and Echospeck's kits will be doing the apprentice duties instead of you." He looked at Nightshrike, who nodded. "For now, let's get back to training and then we'll head home."

Seemingly more energized than before, Leafpaw nodded and faced Nightshrike. With narrowed eyes, she reared on her hind legs and Nightshrike watched her paw connect with her head and she resisted the urge to fight back. She grunted, which seemed like enough of a victory to Leafpaw as she smiled and bounced on her toes.

"Alright," meowed Lichenstorm as he bumped Nightshrike's flank, a playful glint in his eyes. "Let's head back to eat and you," he pointed

a claw at Leafpaw, "need to do your duties." He chuckled and, with Leafpaw leading the way, padded alongside Nightshrike towards the camp.

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When arrived back at camp, Timberskip was gone and most of the warriors were eating, sharing tongues, or waiting for Nightshrike to get back. The fresh-kill pile was stocked and Leafpaw eagerly bounded towards it and grabbed a robin and began to trot happily to Hollowstream, who was sunning himself outside the elder's den. Lichenstorm gazed at Nightshrike warmly and dipped his head, slipping away towards Fennelfur, Dewpath, and Sparrowshadow. Nightshrike's pelt burned as she watched him go, then shook her head and padded towards the medicine den.

She was about to enter when Shellfur let out a hiss. "Don't come in!" He ordered and poked his head out to look at Nightshrike. "It's just you," he sounded tired and Nightshrike narrowed her eyes. "Nightshrike, come with me." He didn't say anything else as he pushed passed her and into the camp itself.

Nightshrike followed, worried. "What's the matter? Is Thorntail okay?" She peered into Shellfur's eyes and her heart sunk. *Something's not right.*

"Nightshrike," began the tom, sounding sad. "Thorntail...isn't getting any better. In fact, he's close to joining StarClan." Shellfur looked up at her. "I'll have Clearstar announce it to the Clan. He doesn't have much time left to live, Nightshrike."

Nightshrike felt her heart crack and split in two. "Y-you can't do any more for him?" She asked quietly, glancing at the den where she heard coughing. *I can't believe he's dying...*

Shellfur shook his spotted head, eyes dark. "I've done everything I can, Nightshrike. Thorntail has barely eaten, hardly drank any water, and he vomits any herbs I try to give him." He paused, his tone softening. "I know how much he means to you, Nightshrike. Believe me, he means so much to this Clan. But sometimes, medicine cats cannot help those who cannot be helped." He said

nothing more as he dipped his head to the deputy and padded off, leaving Nightshrike heartbroken and craving something. That something was a desire to love, be loved, and the undying urge to feel the tom's body beneath her claws.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

It was cold by the time night fell on DawnClan's camp. Small snowflakes began to slowly make their journey down to the lifeless ground and Nightshrike allowed the cold flakes land on her pelt. Timberskip pushed his way out of the nursery where Echospeck and her five kits were sleeping. She had been kitting for over a day and her small kits needed sleep.

Timberskip padded towards her, looking tired and happy. "Nightshirke," he meowed, dipping his head. "After several hours, Echospeck's birth is finally over."

Nightshrike didn't particularly care, but she hid it. "That's wonderful," she forced herself to purr. "What are the kits' names?" She asked.

Timberskip purred. "There are three she-cats and two toms. The she-cats are named Rosekit, Petalkit, and Stonekit."

"And the toms?" Nightshrike prompted.

"Dustkit and Mistlekit," the tom responded. "They're so adorable, more so than I first expected."

Nightshrike forced a purr of congratulations and rose to her paws, stretching. "It's getting late, we'd both better be off to our nests." She nodded to the medicine cat. "Goodnight, Timberskip." The tom flicked his tail and padded off towards the medicine cat den. Nightshrike flicked her ear and padded towards where Leopardcoat and Birdwatcher were guarding the camp. She saw them watching silently and shrugged, thinking she heard something.

Before she could make it to the warrior's den, she heard a hiss and a loud *thump!* She whirled around, snarling as cats poured into the camp. "We're under attack!" She yowled into the den. "DawnClan, attack!" Nightshrike unsheathed her claws and sprang at the cat coming at her, one drenched in mud and reeking of fox dung.

She clashed with the other cat; a tom. Nightshrike could only see his eyes and that made her furious. *How pathetic he would conceal his identity to save his tail.* The voice sneered in her head. Nightshrike lashed out with a paw and slashed his cheek, making him hiss and retaliate. She ducked, narrowly missing a paw to the eye. As the snow began to fall less and less, the mud slowly dripped from her attackers' pelt and she narrowed her eyes.

"You will suffer," hissed the scathing voice of the tomcat. Nightshrike let out a snarl and reared on her hind legs, aiming a blow to his cheek. "You will suffer for what you did to *me!*" A heavy paw hit Nightshrike on the shoulder and she fell to the ground, looking up at her attacker. She hissed and scrambled backward as he stalked towards her. He raised a paw, not to strike her, but wiped the mud off his face. His dark ginger face was revealed and his burning yellow eyes gleamed with a hunger for revenge and hatred.

"Rowantail," the tom's name was like thorns on Nightshrike's tongue as she spat his vile warrior name. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" She glared at the tom that had ruined her life, and he smirked.

"I'm sure you know why I'm here, Nightshrike," he purred, flicking his fluffy tail under her chin. She snapped her jaws at it but earned a *tsk tsk tsk* from Rowantail. "You got me exiled, you got me shamed in front of all the Clans!" He had a crazed look in his eyes and Nightshrike tensed.

"You don't belong here, Rowantail," growled the cracking voice of Thorntail. Nightshrike looked passed her rival and saw the sickly tom standing strong, his ribs jutting out from his pelt. "You better leave before things get ugly," Thorntail warned, taking a shaky step forward.

Rowantail sneered, glaring at the tom. "Thorntail, my old friend." Nightshrike narrowed her eyes and she scrambled to her paws, watching the two carefully. "Come to assist me?" He dipped his head and Thorntail let out a hiss.

"Of course *not*." The tom crouched down and darted forward. Instead of going for Rowantail, he skidded to a halt between

Nightshrike and the former GlacierClan warrior. "Run, Nightshrike," he hissed and Nightshrike looked up at him in surprise. "Go, before he kills you."

Rowantail let out a maniacal laugh and Nightshrike bared her teeth. "And I'll kill Thorntail like I killed Deerstripe and Gorsewhisper." His head went from side to side like a snake, making Nightshrike angrier. "Back when I took that elder's life, you were a mere apprentice. Fresh out of the nursery." He looked her over and Nightshrike's pelt pricked. "Come to think of it, you haven't changed in the slightest."

Thorntail glared at the tom and Nightshrike stood taller. "Take your flea-bitten lackeys out of here, Rowantail. This is *not* their battle." Rowantail laughed once more and grinned wildly at Thorntail.

"You're sick in the body but healthy in the head, I see." He sneered and Nightshrike looked from her mate to the cat who made her seethe in rage. "You protect that traitor like she's the best cat you've ever crossed. You left Halfsnow to roll in her heartbreak while she expects your third litter of kits." Nightshrike glanced at Thorntail, who looked shocked. "And yet, you don't even know that Nightshrike is expecting kits."

"I'm not!" She hissed and took a few steps towards Rowantail. "Liar! Just as you always were and always will be."

Rowantail snorted. "You feel uncomfortable when you wake up, deputy, don't you? You feel pains in your stomach because the kits are rousing. Dismissing it as hungry or cramps when really, you're ignoring the hungry cries of your kits."

Nightshrike felt dizzy as he spoke the truth. *I never thought about kits.* She admitted then shook her head, glaring at the tom. "What is your point, Rowantail?"

The tom didn't answer as Thorntail darted forward and the two toms crashed into each other. Nightshrike shut her eyes and stepped back. She opened them and cried out in sadness. Rowantail had Thorntail pinned to the ground, smirking as he hissed and squirmed. Without hesitation, Nightshrike leaped for the tom and

tackled him off her lover.

"Get away from him!" She shouted, clawing Rowantail's ears as he tried to rear on his hind legs and swat her away. Nightshrike went for his belly, claws ripping open the soft flesh as Rowantail yelled in pain. "You will not take away another cat I love!" With a swift swipe, Rowantail's throat slashed open and he fell to the ground, gasping and gurgling.

"H-help me!" He pleaded, gazing up at Nightshrike with glassy yellow eyes. "G-get a medicine cat!"

Nightshrike sneered, grinning down at him as she put her paw on his shoulder. "And show you mercy? Never. You will die in pure agony just like Deerstripe and Gorsewhisper." She said no more as the crazed light in his eyes died and he stopped breathing. She turned away, satisfied that her rival was dead.

"Nightshrike!" The worried meow of Lichenstorm roused her from her cloud of brief satisfaction and the harsh reality settled in. She turned, seeing the tom with wounds so deep, she didn't see where they stopped. "It...It's Thorntail and Clearstar. Nightshrike, they're both dead."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"No!" Nightshrike staggered, head-spinning as the tom revealed the news to her. Thorntail was gone. The love of her life was dead. What could she do? She couldn't bring him back, he was gone forever. But how did Clearstar die? Didn't he have nine lives from StarClan?

Lichenstorm ducked his head and pressed against her, whispering soothing words to the she-cat. "It'll be okay, Nightshrike." He meowed and rasped his tongue over her ear. It felt like a tree was crushing her lungs. She could hardly breathe, how could she live without Thorntail?

"Where is Clearstar's body?" Her throat felt raw and her voice cracked. *This must be what Halfsnow felt when Thorntail chose me over her. This must be heartbreak.* She looked at Lichenstorm and followed him as he led her through the Clan that was battered and bloody. When they reached the leader's dead body, Nightshrike felt sicker than she had in moons. *Clearstar allowed me into his Clan without hesitation. He trusted me in giving me an apprentice and the position as deputy. Now, he's trusting me with being leader of the Clan he has left behind.* The world around her spun as she comprehended what happened. *First Deerstripe, then Gorsewhisper, then Voletuft, then Thorntail, and now Clearstar.* She dug her claws into the ground, her heart turning to stone as she swung her head around. "Shellfur!" She yelled.

The gray spotted tom turned his head from patching Robinfire and tilted his head. "Yes, Nightshrike?" He prompted, tail flicking.

"Timberskip and I will be going to the Moonpool at once, make sure every cat is seen and taken care of." She ordered and flicked her tail to Lichenstorm. "Lichenstorm is in charge of the camp until we return. This will not be a failure for DawnClan." Nightshrike's voice hardened. "This is the day we prove that we're stronger than the other Clans!"

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The air was crisp and cold as Timberskip and Nightshrike reached the Moonpool, their paws cold and calloused from walking so far in the bitter cold. Nightshrike glanced at the medicine cat before bounding into the cave where the starry pool of water lay, glistening with the secrets only the stars knew.

"Lap at it for a second," instructed Timberskip as he settled down in a crouch in front of the pool. Nightshrike did the same, the fur on her spine rising. Fear crashed into her at the thought of speaking with the spirits of the cats she slew.

Without a word to the brown tom, Nightshrike lapped gently at the water. She was shocked at just how cold the pool of water was, even in early Leafbare. Tiredness pawed at her and it crept up her paws, consuming her until she closed her eyes. When she opened them, she was in the starry fields of StarClan with nine cats around her. Some of them had white outlines and stars in their fur and the others had red outlines and faded pelts.

One of the red-outlined cats padded towards her, making Nightshrike tense and unsheathe her claws. "Do not fear, Nightshrike." Purred the cat, who was most likely a she-cat. "With this life, I give you a thirst for revenge. It will fuel you to crush those who stood in your path moons ago." She touched her nose to Nightshrike's forehead and she felt a fierce desire for revenge claw at her insides, making her draw her lips back in a growl as the pain subsided and the she-cat padded away.

A cat Nightshrike never thought she'd see headed her way. Deerstripe's light gray tabby pelt was sleek and groomed, much different than when she was an elder in OakClan. Her yellow eyes fixed on Nightshrike, making her both uncomfortable and happy at the same time. Her once bony shoulders were broad and muscled, looking like the warrior she used to be before Nightshrike was born. "With this life, I give you regret. You have made many mistakes and you have yet to feel a sliver of regret. Hopefully, this life will change that." Something dark clawed Nightshrike's heart, making an ache form and she was shocked at how much it hurt. *This is regret.* She thought, struggling to push it away as Deerstripe sat down

away from her.

A tomcat replaced the fallen elder and she narrowed her eyes at who she saw. She didn't recognize him, but he looked familiar and she wondered if she'd ever seen him before. Her shoulders tensed and her tail lashed in confusion as he stopped in front of her.

"You do not know me, Nightshrike." The spirit meowed, his dark ginger fur glittering with stars. He dipped his head. "My name is Russetfang. I am Rowantail's brother from moons before your parents fell in love." Realization hit her like a blow from an enemy. She saw Rowantail's broad shoulder, his wide paws, and thick-furred tail on his brother. "With this life, I give you the ability to put your Clan above yourself. Even though you will have nine lives, your warriors have only one. Remember that." He touched his nose to Nightshrike's head and a searing pain flashed through her, worse than any wound caused in battle. She staggered, breathing hard as Russetfang padded away and sat next to Deerstripe.

A black and white spotted she-cat took the spot where Russetfang was moments before. Her orange eyes were tender and fierce, surprising Nightshrike. She felt something tug at her heart and she sniffed at the she-cat.

"My daughter," the StarClan she-cat meowed. "A dark path has been walked for you to be here." Nightshrike neared fell down as she realized this cat was her mother. *This is Specklewatcher.* She figured. "With this life, I give you a mother's love. When you give birth in the harshness of Leafbare, remember this life." As her nose grazed the fur on Nightshrike's head, something warm filled her body and she nearly broke into a purr. She relished the feeling and she knew what it was. "Love is a powerful emotion, daughter. Nothing is more powerful than a mother's love for her kits." As Specklewatcher padded away, the warm feeling went away with her, leaving Nightshrike cold.

A red-outlined tom padded forward and Nightshrike tilted her head. "You seem familiar," she meowed bluntly as he reached her. "Do I know you?"

The tom chuckled. "Not in the waking world, no." His voice was

tough and smooth at the same time, making Nightshrike jump. This was the cat that kept whispering to her in her ear. "My name is long forgotten but I was once a warrior of GlacierClan, the very Clan you seek to destroy with OakClan. My mother was from OakClan and my father was from GlacierClan. My warrior name was never granted to me, but I gave myself one. I named myself Badgershade." Nightshrike nodded, resisting the sudden urge to dip her head. "With this life, I give you the determination to complete what you started. You'll need it." He touched her head, making her fur spike and fire spark in her chest and spread throughout her entire body. The feeling was intense and Nightshrike staggered and crouched low to the starry ground, breathing hard as she looked up at the tom. Badgershade blinked down at her and padded to the opposite side of the field, sitting next to the she-cat.

Nightshrike's father took Badgershade's place. Blackheart looked sleek and strong, just like he had before Nightshrike killed him when she was only an apprentice. "My daughter," he sounded wary and Nightshrike lashed her tail. "With this life, I give you resilience. Use it sparingly." He briefly touched his nose to his daughter's forehead but the feeling was intense. Nightshrike doubled over, throat burning and paws on fire while Blackheart watched without moving a muscle. As she calmed down, he spoke. "That night at the Moonpool, you asked why I called you my daughter." His voice was tight with anger and sadness and his eyes were shadowed. "I guess you know why don't you?" Nightshrike didn't answer and just watched the dead medicine cat warily. He took a step closer to her, making their whiskers brush ever so slightly. "When you lose your ninth life, you will not join me, your mother, or your siblings here in StarClan. Instead, you will go where the most twisted cats will go. That is a promise to you, Nightshrike." He spat her name and Nightshrike felt her fur bristle as Blackheart padded angrily away and plopped down next to Russetfang.

A small dark gray and black patched kit tottered up to Nightshrike, making her very confused. The kit looked barely a couple of days old and yet, their eyes shone with wisdom. "Nightshrike!" He squeaked and the she-cat tilted her head in silence. "I'm Leopardkit and Silverkit will be coming after me. I'm your brother and Silverkit is our sister!"

Nightshrike's heart cracked and her eyes watered as her little brother reared on his stubby hind legs and touched her muzzle with his nose. "With this life, I give you the energy to play like a kit. Even if Dawnflame, Songscratch, and Reedfrost aren't your real siblings, your kits will need that energy." He looked up at her and scampered away to where Blackheart and Specklewatcher were sitting and sat in front of them. A new energy seared through Nightshrike and she felt restless, her paws shuffling back and forth as the urge to run claimed her body.

A small silver and white tabby kitten replaced Leopardkit and she gazed up at Nightshrike with wide yellow eyes. "Hello!" She chirped. "I'm Silverkit! With this life, I give you the ability to protect the weakest cats in the Clan." Silverkit reared on her hind legs and had to put her tiny front paws on Nightshrike's chest in order to touch her chin with her nose. Something strong consumed Nightshrike and she felt a sudden desire to take Silverkit between her paws and guide her to her family. Instead, she bounded away and Nightshrike was alone for a moment.

A familiar ginger tabby face approached Nightshrike and she felt her heart burst. "Hello, Nightshrike," purred Clearstar as he dipped his head. She copied the tom and he shook his head. "You are becoming a leader, not a deputy. Keep your chin high, Nightshrike." He paused and leaned towards her, brushing his nose against her forehead. "With this life, I give you the strength to protect your Clan, even at the cost of your lives." Pain shot through Nightshrike and she let out a cry of pain and her paws began to tremble as her heart skipped a beat and her breathing began to shudder. Clearstar flicked the tip of his tail and the cats who gave Nightshrike a life gathered behind him. "I now hail you by your new name, Nightstar. Your old life is no more. Return to DawnClan and protect them from what is to come."

The cats around her began to spin as her new name filled the air. "Nightstar! Nightstar! Nightstar!"

Chapter Forty

It was nearly sunhigh by the time Timberskip and a newly named Nightstar returned to the DawnClan camp. Lichenstorm was the first to greet them, touching noses with each of them and sending sparks through Nightstar as their noses touched. Timberskip dipped his head and slunk away towards the nursery.

"How was it?" Asked Lichenstorm as he followed Nightstar towards the Jagged Stone. "Did you get your nine lives and your name?" Nightstar let out a sigh and flicked her tail over his mouth and raised her voice.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" She yowled, power tingling in her paws as she spoke the summons. *Things will have to change around here. But, that can wait until my kits are born and become apprentices.* She thought as the Clan, *her* Clan, gathered around. "I have returned from the Moonpool and have gotten my nine lives and my new name from StarClan."

Cheering erupted from the cats below and Nightstar soaked it all in at once. "Before sunhigh passes, I would like to appoint my deputy." The cheers died and were replaced with silence as every warrior straightened. "I say these words before the spirits of StarClan so they may hear and approve my choice. The new deputy of DawnClan will be Lichenstorm."

The tom looked shocked but smiled and nodded nonetheless. He rose to his paws and padded towards Nightstar. "I am deeply honored by your decision and I vow to serve my Clan until the day I die." He meowed and the cheering began once more.

"There is one more ceremony I must perform before I dismiss you to your duties," she went on and saw Leafpaw's eyes light up. "Leafpaw, come forward."

Her apprentice took a couple of excited strides forward and

Nightstar leaped down from the Jagged Stone and addressed her apprentice. "Leafpaw, do you promise to uphold the Warrior Code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" She asked. Leafpaw's eyes sparkled and she opened her mouth.

"I do, Nightstar." She meowed strongly and Nightstar twitched her whiskers.

"I, Nightstar, leader of DawnClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has worked hard to understand the ways of a warrior and I condemn her as a warrior in your honor." She raised her head and looked at Leafpaw. "Leafpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Leaffire." She touched her muzzle to Leaffire's head and felt her tongue graze her shoulder fur. "StarClan honors your tenacity and abundant energy and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Leaffire! Leaffire! Leaffire!" Chanted the Clan, the loudest being from Pebblewhisker, who watched Leaffire with warm eyes as she slunk towards him.

"Meeting dismissed," Nightstar turned away and began to pad towards Lichenstorm. Then, remembering she was now the leader of DawnClan, she slackened her strides and sat down next to her deputy.

Lichenstorm let out a small purr and glanced at her. "Are you okay?" He asked softly and Nightstar nodded. "Come on," he stood up and flicked his tail. "We have yet to bury Thorntail and Clearstar and we need to prepare them for their vigil."

Nightstar shook her head, surprising her deputy. "The Gathering is tonight, the cats who will attend won't get to sit vigil." She meowed and rose to her paws. "Lichenstorm, I have to ask a favor from you."

The deputy nodded and tilted his head to the side. "Yes, Nightstar?" He asked and looked at the black she-cat. Nightstar gazed at her deputy and shifted her paws.

"I-I'm expecting Thorntail's kits, so is Halfsnow." Nightstar nearly winced at how emotional she sounded. Almost. "But, I can't have

these kits while being a leader of a Clan that depends on me." She glanced up at Lichenstorm, surprised to see his gaze glinting with support. "Lichenstorm, can you help me take care of these kits until they become apprentices?"

Lichenstorm let out a long purr and gently nuzzled her. "Of course I will, Nightstar." He meowed and licked her cheek. "Will they know about their real father?"

That question hit Nightstar hard. She wanted Thorntail to see his kits be born, become apprentices, mold into warriors, and possible leader or deputy. She shook her head. "Not until they're older." She decided. "They need to be old enough to understand that Thorntail was a respected warrior that was killed in his prime. Nothing less than that."

Lichenstorm didn't argue and he dipped his head. He padded away and Nightstar headed for the leader's den. *Her* new den that she should've been sharing with Thorntail. She took a step inside, the fur along her spine rose and she resisted the urge to run from the black void. Her paws moved forward and soon, she was lying in a freshly lined moss nest with feathers and tiny pebbles she shuffled back and forth between her paws. The sunlight was soon blocked by the shape of a cat and Robinfire's scent filled the den.

"I brought you a squirrel," she meowed, her voice muffled by the prey. Robinfire padded forward and stood in front of Nightstar and gently laid the creature down in front of her.

"I'm not hungry," she lied and shifted onto her belly to muffle the growling. Robinfire sighed and sat down, looking out of the den. Nightstar looked up at her friend and sat up, tail flicking over her front paws and her growing belly bulged, making Nightstar uncomfortable.

"Thorntail used to be such an arrogant furball," meowed Robinfire suddenly. Nightstar glanced at her, confused. "He was so proud of himself, I'm surprised he even got a mate in Halfsnow."

"Why are you surprised?" Asked the new leader, tail twitching. She was curious to know why Robinfire spoke of Thorntail like that. *Are*

they related?

The red tabby warrior let out a sigh and her shoulders shuddered. "They were friends since the time they opened their eyes in the nursery many seasons ago." She sounded sad and Nightstar narrowed her eyes slightly. "Halfsnow's father didn't like it that she was spending so much time with Thorntail, er, Thornpaw at the time. He watched them closely whenever they were training. It was easy, considering he was Thorntail's mentor."

"You haven't said his name." Noted Nightstar. "Why is that?"

Robinfire shot her a glance. "Before Clearstar became leader, there was one cat that was brutal to all the others. Clearstar was Clearwater at the time and we wondered why he deeply disliked Thorntail's mentor. He was exiled from GlacierClan for one reason or another and ended up here."

"Like me," Nightstar meowed and her paws started to tingle with realization. "What's his name?"

"It's forbidden to say, but you're my leader." Robinfire sounded reluctant. As though saying the treacherous name somehow brought shame onto her shoulders. "His name was Badgershade. Strange cat but very strict and manipulative. Our leader at the time, Heronstar, fell victim to his honey-like words and charming personality. Badgershade did many horrible things to this Clan, but when Thorntail became a warrior, Badgershade was killed in battle against OakClan."

Nightstar listened without speaking, though she wanted to ask so many more questions. *How did Badgershade become so vile? Why did he mentor Thorntail? Did he corrupt Thorntail but died before he could do anything?*

Robinfire faced her, eyes dark and shadowed. "You are a very young and inexperienced leader, Nightstar." Her voice was tight and her eyes sparkled as she rose to her paws. "Clearstar was quick to trust you because he knew your father. Blackheart was well-known in all the Clans for his ability to save every cat he ever treated. However, when he died at the Moonpool all those moons ago, Clearstar saw

him inside you and let you in. My question is, did he ever regret it?" Without giving Nightstar a chance to speak, Robinfire dipped her head and padded out of the den.

Chapter Forty-One

It was really cold when Nightstar led her Clan to the Gathering Hollow. Behind her, the cats she chose were murmuring to each other and whispering about what they expected the other leaders would share. To her right, Lichenstorm was grunting with effort as they fought through the snow that fell between sunhigh and moonhigh. At her left, Shellfur was carefully but swiftly padding through the cold white powder. Timberskip had to stay behind since Petalkit and Rosekit started coughing. Sickness was common with young kits. However, when a few hours old kits start to show signs of illness, they have to be watched every second.

Nightstar raised her tail and stopped, hearing the snow crunch many times behind her as her Clanmates halted. She flicked the tip of her tail and plunged into the Gathering Hollow where the other Clans were waiting. Nightstar's Clanmates scattered before she could turn around as she headed for the Moon Tree; the ancient tree where leaders stood to announce their information to the rest of the Clans.

Swiftstar met her before she climbed up the tree. "Nightshrike," he meowed and dipped his head, seeing Lichenstorm join the other deputies. "Where is Clearstar? Is he ill?"

Nightstar shook her head and began to claw up the tree, the ginger and white leader at her side. "Clearstar was killed in battle." She meowed and saw the tom's shocked expression. "I'll announce more once the Gathering starts." Nightstar sat down and faced the cats who were chattering below.

"Cats from all Clans!" Blackstar's voice quieted the conversations and Nightstar's tail draped over the branch next to her, flicking off the wood. "Let the Gathering begin! I shall begin this moon's Gathering. We have three new warriors among our ranks. Please welcome Jaggedsong, Moonwish, and Shadowstream!"

"Jaggedsong! Moonwish! Shadowstream!" Chanted the other cats,

surprising Nightstar at the amount of force from their voices.

"I will go next," meowed Spiderstar and he rose to his paws. "We have ten new warriors in OakClan. Please welcome Graywolf, Wolfstripe, Ferretflight, Poolheart, Lakefur, Wildwing, Sedgepelt, Silvershadow, Rowanflower, and Talonclaw!"

"Graywolf, Wolfstripe, Ferretflight, Poolheart, Lakefur, Wildwing, Sedgepelt, Silvershadow, Rowanflower, and Talonclaw!" Cheered the Clans.

Swiftstar glanced at Nightstar and nodded. Then, he faced the Clans, making Nightstar nervous. This was her first time speaking to the entirety of the Clans as a Clan leader. How did Clearstar make it look so easy? As Swiftstar said his report, he turned to Nightstar and dipped his head: an invitation for her to step forward.

Nightstar shakily rose to her paws and she felt the urge to leap down from the tree and sprint away as far as possible. *No.* She was a leader now. She dug her claws into the bark and took a breath. "Cats from all four Clans, I have a sad announcement to make. Yesterday, we were attacked by a group of rogues led by the exiled GlacierClan warrior, Rowantail." Gasps filled the clearing and Nightstar hurried on. "Thorntail sacrificed his life to save mine and Clearstar was slain in combat with another cat. I went to the Moonpool and received my nine lives and my name. My name is now Nightstar and Lichenstorm is my deputy." She didn't wait for the cheers to start and she kept going, wishing for the Gathering to suddenly end so she didn't have to carry on her report. "We have a shockingly full nursery with Echospeck and her kits, Halfsnow, Poppybee, Whiteblaze, and myself in the nursery expecting or caring for kits."

A loud purr erupted from Swiftstar and she looked at him, confused. "So many queens promises so many kits, it'll be hard for you to keep up with."

Blackstar let out a *mrrow* of amusement. "When they become apprentices, the prey in your territory better be careful and hide pretty well."

Nightstar lashed her tail, not realizing they were only teasing her. "This Gathering has come to an end." She declared, already leaping down from the branch. "Please go to your respective leaders and leave." As soon as her paws touched the cold forest floor, she was surrounded in her Clanmates and they began their freezing trip back to camp.

Chapter Forty-Two

Nightstar hadn't realized she had fallen asleep until she opened her eyes and she was in a deathly quiet field, deprived of life and the cold snow. She scrambled to her paws and her senses went wild, trying to detect any sign of an ambush or foul play. Her paws tingled at the thought of a battle and her claws unsheathed. Nothing made any sound. Not even the bushes or trees rustled when the wind touched them. It was just silence. Nightstar *hated* silence. Then, the slightest hint of movement made her ear twitch and she spun around, prepared to claw the pelt off of what or who was sneaking up on her.

Instead of an enemy, a rather young tom was padding through the undergrowth, completely oblivious to the leader clearly in his path. Nightstar let out a loud hiss, but not even his ear twitched at the sound. *What is this?* He headed her way and as he got close, she lashed out with a paw. Her black paw fazed straight to through the tom and he walked through Nightstar. As he passed through, she gasped her throat began to burn. She wheezed and watched the tom begin to walk faster until he was running. On impulse, she raced after him. The ground turned into a blur as she ran after the tom. The forest floor felt strangely familiar beneath her paws; like she'd been there before. The cat in front of her darted out of the way of a looming oak tree and Nightstar barreled right into it. Instead of smacking into the tree, she went right through it and she looked back in confusion. She heard a voice and she skidded to a stop, seeing a black and white she-cat calling a name. Her heart stopped as she realized the name she was calling.

"Blackheart!" A young Specklewatcher hurried down to meet the young medicine cat. "What are you doing here? You could get caught!" She sounded worried, but she pressed against him nonetheless.

Blackheart nuzzled her, licking her muzzle softly. "I couldn't stay away from you any longer." He meowed as she gave him a

concerned look. "Are you doing okay?"

Specklewatcher lashed her tail, eyes burning. "What about Whitefeather?" She demanded. Her tone was far from angry, just concerned and worried about the tom. "What would she say? In fact, what would Whitefeather *and* Deerstar say?"

Blackheart purred. "They won't know," he promised and Nightstar narrowed her eyes. "How could they? After all, they believe I'm out gathering borage for Marshflight and Weaselfoot."

Specklewatcher sighed, tail twining around Blackhearts. "You can't keep lying to your Clan, Blackheart." She meowed softly.

"I'm not," protested the medicine cat. "I came out here to gather more borage so Applekit, Cloverkit, Deerkit, and Volekit have more milk to drink."

Nightstar froze. *Applekit, Cloverkit, and Deerkit.* Those were her Clanmates in OakClan! *Applestar, Cloverleap, and Deerstripe must've been born around the same time as each other.* She reasoned. *But who is Volekit? It can't be Voletuft or she'd be too old.*

The NightClan warrior sighed and a new question formed in Nightstar's mind. *What is a NightClan cat doing on GlacierClan's territory?* She bounded forward and kept listening.

"Still, you shouldn't be risking your loyalty to see me." Specklewatcher put a paw under Blackheart's chin and lifted it so they were seeing each other eye to eye. "However stupid you may act, I still love you."

"Blackheart!" The scene changed and suddenly, they were in OakClan's camp. It was a meeting about something Nightstar was interested in knowing. Countless unfamiliar faces and pelt colors were all around Nightstar and her father, all of which couldn't see the leader. At Blackheart's paws were three small kits, one of which was mewling and crying. Nightstar's ears flattened at the noise and watched. "What is this? Who's kits are these?" A light brown she-cat with lighter paws and long legs was staring at Blackheart, eyes narrowed.

Blackheart flicked his tail over the kits. The one shrieking was squirming while the other two were perfectly still. "Deerstar," he meowed. "These-these are my kits." Nightstar gaped at her father, eyes wide.

The Clan around him gasped and two elders, a dark gray tabby she-cat and a silver tabby tom glanced at each other before bowing their heads. Blackheart glanced at them and flicked his tail.

The dark gray tabby she-cat spoke, her tone sad and slightly disappointed. "Blackheart," she meowed, looking up at the tom. "What have you done?"

Blackheart looked pained. "Pikeflower I-" He was cut off by the silver tabby tom who spoke sharper than the other she-cat.

"You broke the Warrior Code *and* the Medicine Cat Code!" His tone was furious, more so than Pikeflower. Blackheart dropped his head. "How could you? Have you no honor or loyalty to your Clanmates and your Clan?" His last sentence was icy. "How did you become a medicine cat?"

Pikeflower gasped and swatted at the tom, eyes flashing with uncertainty. "Splashfrost!" She scolded but the tom didn't look deterred as he stared Blackheart down.

"You say these kits are yours?" Deerstar's voice was steady but Nightstar saw shock and betrayal shining in her blue eyes. Blackheart nodded and stood in front of his kits, like a mother. "Where is the mother? I'd like to speak with her."

Blackheart winced and Nightstar bared her teeth but she could do nothing as her *father* spoke again. "S-Specklewatcher did not survive the birth of the kits." He choked and dug his claws into the ground. Glancing up at Deerstar, his eyes flashed with despair and desperation. "Please, Deerstar! I cannot give up these kits. They are all I have left of Specklewatcher! Please, let us stay!"

Deerstar was silence before she silently looked at the kits. Her eyes were soft but stern as she regarded the bundles of fur. "Two of them aren't moving," she meowed. "Why is that?"

Blackheart looked away. "They died before they could take their first breath." He sounded sad and Nightstar pricked her ears.

"I see," the leader looked at the medicine cat and flicked her tail. "You will remain in this Clan and so will these kits." She turned to her warriors. "Applefoot, help Vixenpool bury the dead kits."

Nightstar tensed as the former leader of OakClan nodded and rose to his paws. Vixenpool did the same and together they carried the two unmoving kits carefully out of camp where they would be buried. The black she-cat looked at Deerstar, expecting the she-cat to say something. Instead, a new voice spoke.

"Deerstar, Voletuft has given birth just a few days ago." A white and gray speckled she-cat spoke with authority. *Whitefeather.* "She can nurse the kit until she is of apprentice age."

Deerstar nodded and looked at Blackheart. "What will you name the kit?" She asked and the tom raised his head.

"Her name is Nightkit," his voice cracked and Nightstar felt every hair on her body prick. This was *her.* "The other two are Leopardkit and Silverkit."

Whitefeather padded forward. "Why Nightkit?" She asked, her eyes confused as she fixed her green gaze on Nightkit.

"Because," Blackheart's voice shook. "That's the path she will walk until she is ready to die. This kit walks a dark path and no cat can stop her." Nightstar felt pain in her belly and her eyes flew open just as Blackheart turned to her and nodded. She screeched and jerked up, panting. Immense pain exploded in her belly and something told her what was happening. Her kits were coming and they were coming *fast.*

Chapter Forty-Three

Nightstar let out a yowl of pure agony as her flank rippled and pain sparked through her body. Her jaws parted and another painful screech escaped her lips. She was trembling with pain as Shellfur and Leaffire charged into her den, eyes alarmed and wide.

"Nightstar? What's the matter?" Asked Shellfur, rushing towards her with Leaffire on his tail. He set a spotted paw on her belly and shuddered. "The kits," he breathed and looked at Leaffire. "Get a stick and bring me Timberskip. Get some other warriors as well, we need some more help with this birth." He ordered and turned back to Nightstar as Leaffire rushed off. "Don't worry, Nightstar. You'll be just fine."

The she-cat couldn't speak through the pain she felt. It was unbearable and she couldn't express through the string of curses under her breath the amount of pain she was enduring. Her vision blurred as pain consumed her. Through the pain, she saw the pelt of Lichenstorm entering the den and placing a stick at her paws. She took it between her teeth and put her paws on top of it, claws sinking into the wood as she braced herself. Pressure built in her chest and her eyes screwed shut as a black wave washed over her eyes and consumed her.

"Leaffire, take this one and lick it." Shellfur's meow was far away as Nightstar's eyes slowly opened. Around her, the medicine cats were speaking to each other and Lichenstorm and Leaffire were licking two kits. "Hang on, Nightstar. There's one more on the way." The gray spotted tom rested a paw on her belly and another powerful ripple racked throughout her body and her eyes quickly shut as she bit so hard on the stick, it splintered.

"That's the last one," meowed Timberskip as he moved towards Nightstar but drew back. The leader opened her eyes and saw three shrieking bundles of fur wiggling towards the curve of her belly, eager for milk.

Shellfur let out a content sigh and watched the three kits nurse. "Three healthy, fighting kits." He purred and glanced at Lichenstorm, who was gaping at the kits. "Come on, you furball. Help Nightstar name them and Timberskip and I will get water." With that, Shellfur and his mentor left the den, Leaffire on their tails yapping about something.

"What will you name them?" Lichenstorm asked softly, sitting next to Nightstar's head. He was staring at the kits, eyes wide and soft as he looked from the three kits to Nightstar. One of them was a gray and white splotched she-cat, a tortoiseshell she-cat, and an identical tortoiseshell tom. He glanced at Nightstar, eyes filled with something she couldn't place her paw on.

She ran her tail across the flank of the gray and white she-cat. The kit shivered and let out an indignant squeak before going back to nursing. Nightstar thought for a moment before she spoke. "Mosskit," her voice was soft and tender, like sharp claws scraping against a stone. "Her name will be Mosskit."

Lichenstorm nodded without speaking, his gaze fluttering to the tom. "What about him?" He asked, pointing with a claw to Nightstar's son. "He looks like an ember from a fire."

Nightstar twitched her ear at the mention of fire. "Then his name will be Emberkit." She touched the top of her son's head and looked at her unnamed kit: a daughter. "Her name will be Hollykit." She meowed and glanced at Lichenstorm, who was nodding.

"They're beautiful, Nightstar," he breathed and touched his nose to her forehead. "I'll let you rest and I'll come back when I wake up." With that, the deputy rose to his paws and quietly padded out of the den.

Nightstar watched him go and looked down at her three kits. *Thorntail, are you seeing them? They're so beautiful, why aren't you here with me?* Her heart ached as she flashed back to his death, a painful and horrible death that Thorntail did not deserve. *He died with honor, that's what he would've wanted.* She reminded herself with a sigh.

As she rested her chin on her paws and watched her kits, she shuddered as she remembered her dream from when she was a warrior. Blackness tugged at the corners of her eyes and she was pulled away from her kits into the void that awaited her.

She stood in a starry clearing with trees that reached the puffy white clouds over her head. Nightstar saw the sun shining brightly and it blinded her, making her blink furiously and look away to rid her sight from the white splotches.

"Nightstar," a voice made her jump and she turned her head to see a StarClan spirit. She didn't recognize this cat and she unsheathed her claws. The cat noticed and swished their tail side to side. "Sheathe your claws, Nightstar. I cannot do any harm to you."

"I'd rather be safe than dead," the leader countered and faced the cat. "Who are you? What do you want from me?" The spirit chuckled and Nightstar's fur prickled with unease. Were they taunting her? Why bring her here when her kits needed her in the nest in her den?

"I am a cat whose name has been long forgotten in the vines of time." The cat took a step towards Nightstar as they spoke. "My name is Oaktail and I was the DawnClan medicine cat long before Timberskip or Shellfur."

Nightstar's eyes narrowed. "What do you want?" She repeated, tail lashing from side to side.

Oaktail studied her for a moment before speaking. "I have come to warn you, Nightstar." His voice was serious and Nightstar let out a dry laugh.

"Warn me?" She scoffed and watched Oaktail closely. "Warn me about what?" Nightstar smirked as Oaktail hesitated and sneered. "Is StarClan so up in the clouds that they forget what they're going to say?"

"Beware of the path you walk, Nightstar." A new voice startled Nightstar and she whirled around and she saw no one. Suddenly, cats surrounded her, chanting. "Beware! Beware! Beware!" They closed in and Nightstar let out a warning snarl, trembling.

They pounced and Nightstar let out a screech. Spirits pinned her to the

ground and hissed, pawing at her with unsheathed claws that hurt. Nightstar tried to fight back, but her paws fazed through the StarClan cats.

"Beware of the path you walk, Nightstar." Oaktail's meow was far away and Nightstar reached out a paw, desperate for help. "Because one day, it will lead you to your downfall and your demise.

Chapter Forty-Four

Nightstar's eyes opened and she saw the sky turning pale as the sun rose over the horizon. Her dream ebbed away and Nightstar shivered, making Emberkit stir but not wake up. She let out a sigh and rested her chin on her paws, blinking away sleep as her body woke up.

She closed her eyes, giving in to the tiredness even though she had just slept. Nightstar's ear twitched as a cat's shadow fell on her. She opened one eye lazily and she saw Shellfur with herbs between his teeth. He dipped his head and set the precious leaves on the stone floor.

"Good morning, Nightstar." Purred the tom as he glanced at her kits at her belly. "How are you feeling?" Shellfur padded towards the leader and nudged the herbs towards her muzzle.

Nightstar lifted her head and lapped at the leaves, grimacing at the sharp tang and bitter taste. "I feel sore all over," she admitted and looked at her kits. "It was worth it, though." The black she-cat added and glanced at the medicine cat. "What brings you into my den other than to deliver herbs, Shellfur?"

The tom's smile wavered and he shuffled his paws. "Rosekit and Petalkit are slowly getting over their cough but Hollowstream has whitecough." Nightstar tensed as he went on. "Shadeheart, Dewpath, and Stormbird have also gotten sick."

Nightstar sat up, disturbing her kits as they mewled in protest. She ignored their cries and focused on her medicine cat. "When did they start showing signs of illness?" She asked, shoulders rock solid as she stared into Shellfur's green eyes.

The tom shuffled his paws and answered awkwardly. "Just this morning, before you woke up and after your kitting. Shadeheart and Dewpath had started coughing and Stormbird had a fever. They're in my den now, if you want to see them."

The leader shook her head and rose to her paws. "Fetch Lichenstorm and tell him to watch the kits." She padded towards the entrance of her den and Shellfur stepped in her way.

"Nightstar," he meowed, eyes firm and worried. "Your kits are young and so are Echospeck's. If you leave them, they won't have anything to eat until you come back." He paused before going on. "Who will keep them warm until you return?"

Nightstar fixed him with her amber stare until he looked away. "Lichenstorm can watch them and Echospeck can nurse them for a while, Shellfur." She turned her head away and swiftly exited her den, leaving the spotted medicine cat apprentice inside.

Her Clan was alive and doing their duties like normal. If there wasn't sickness running in the camp, her warriors didn't show it as they performed their duties like any other day. Nightstar twitched her tail and she padded towards the clearing, her tail flicking back and forth. Her Clanmates turned their heads to nod and duck their heads respectively.

Nightstar headed for the medicine den where she heard coughing and sneezing. She flattened her ears and poked her head in, seeing Timberskip crouching over Petalkit and coaxing her to eat the herbs at his paws.

"I don't want to eat them!" Complained the kit, stinking her pale pink tongue at the green herbs. "They taste gross!"

"Please, Petalkit," begged Timberskip and Nightstar curled her lip at his plea. "You must eat them or you won't get better. Do you want to be sick like Rosekit and not be able to play?"

Petalkit huffed and turned away, her nose streaming. She lifted a small paw and wiped it. "I'm a strong warrior! I'll get better on my own!"

"No, you won't." Nightstar meowed firmly, startling the kit and medicine cat. "Petalkit, you won't become an apprentice if you're too sick to leave this den. You want to become a warrior?" Petalkit nodded vigorously. "Warriors do what they're told and eat what

they are given. Even if they are nasty herbs from a medicine cat."

The kit let out a sigh and pouted. "Fine," she groaned and sniffed the herbs, recoiling as though she was struck. "They smell nasty!"

"They'll taste worse but it goes away." Promised Timberskip as he watched the kit closely. As Petalkit lapped up the leaves, he turned his head to Nightstar. "Yes, Nightstar?"

Nightstar flicked her tail, gazing intently at the medicine cat and making him uncomfortable. "How far along are Halfsnow, Poppybee, and Whiteblaze?"

Timberskip looked at Petalkit and back at his leader. "Halfsnow is a moon along, Poppybee is due any moment, and Whiteblaze is a moon and a half along." He meowed.

Nightstar nodded. "Thanks, Timberskip." She meowed and ducked out of the den without another word. As her eyes scanned the clearing, cats burst through the bramble wall and skidded to a halt in the enter of camp.

"Nightstar!" Gasped Thornbite as she saw Nightstar. "T-there's two badgers in the forest. We're outnumbered and we need help!"

Nightstar nodded, excited at the thought of a battle. "Sparrowflower, Robinfire, Sparrowshadow, Goldenpatch, Pebblewhisker, Fennelfur, and Leaffire!" She yowled and, led by Thorntail's daughter, raced out of camp.

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It was a massacre when Nightstar's patrol reached the scene of the attack. Blood was everywhere and those who weren't fighting were helping the others who were injured or unconscious. Her patrol immediately split into pairs and leaped at the badgers, Nightstar in hot pursuit.

She leaped at the closest animal, clinging to its hind leg and latching on with her fangs. The white-striped beast let out a snarl and lashed out with a paw as Pebblewhisker got close but leaped back with a hiss. A paw struck Nightstar in the chest and she flew

back, losing her grip on the badger and tumbling into the grass. Scrambling to her paws, Nightstar regained her breath and charged the badger, slicing its flank with her claws.

"Nightstar!" The cry from Leaffire made her fur stand on end as the first badger lifted the new warrior up by the chest and began to shake her like a squirrel. Nightstar felt anger and pain sear through her and she forgot all about the badger she was in combat with, bounding towards her former apprentice's assist.

With Pebblewhisker at her side, she raced at the badger and leaped onto its back, making her way to its face. Nightstar sank her claws into the badger's matted pelt and scratched at its eyes. She saw the grip on Leaffire's chest being loose but unfortunately, the badger had its attention on Nightstar now.

With a leap, she jumped off the badger, seeing its now bleeding eyes with a hint of satisfaction. Pebblewhisker and a wounded Birdwatcher were getting Leaffire out of the battle and Nightstar lashed her tail. The badger ran at her, teeth bared and eyes blazing. Nightstar grinned and leaped out of the way, causing the badger to run nose-first into the tree behind her. She took her time and slashed the badger's black and white shoulder before pouncing on its back. She sank her teeth into its back and clawed its hind-quarters as it tried to buck her off.

Pain flared up her back as claws sank into her flesh and ripped her off the back of the badger. She toppled to the ground, jumping to her paws to face the other badger, bloody and angry. Both badgers were facing her, snarling and snapping their jaws at her. Pain shot up her tail and she whirled around, lashing out with a paw and raking the badgers' face with her claws. Teeth sank into her chest and she flew across the clearing, vision darkening.

Goldenpatch, Robinfire, Sparrowflower, and Sparrowshadow were rushing to her aid and pounced on the badgers. Nightstar's chest heaved and her throat burned as blood dripped to the ground, the grass soaking it in. She blinked but blood bubbled at her lips and her head slumped and her eyes closed as her life ebbed away.

She opened her eyes and saw the spirits of StarClan around her.

Nightstar scrambled to her paws and looked around, alarmed. "Why am I here?" The leader demanded, claws unsheathing. "Send me back!"

A dark-gray tabby tom stepped forward, his green eyes gleaming. "Nightstar, you have lost a life. Your body needs time to heal." He meowed and flicked his tail.

"Stormfall is right, Nightstar." Meowed Russetfang as he twitched his tail. His eyes were dark and Nightstar narrowed her eyes. "The wound that killed you is healing slowly, but your Clanmates are taking you back to camp as we speak."

Nightstar lashed her tail. "Then why keep me here?" She asked harshly. "I could be walking with my Clanmates rather than them carry me."

Russetfang shook his head, tail flicking. "You are too exhausted to even open your eyes. Which is why you are here other than the loss of a life."

"Besides," added another spirit. "You'll feel much better after you heal and a much-needed rest."

"That's right, Cinderwing." Agreed Stormfall as he licked a paw and drew it over his ears. "For now, you will rest and sleep the day away and when you wake up, something will be waiting for you."

Nightstar tensed. "What will be waiting?" She demanded but a black wave crashed over her eyes and she plunged into darkness.

Chapter Forty-Five

Nightstar blinked open her eyes and smelled the sharp tang of herbs around her. Her throat screeched for water and her chest was flaring with immense pain as she shifted in her nest in the medicine cat den. Around her, the sleeping shapes of her warriors were bundled in green herbs and cobwebs. Her body ached all over and it hurt to even breathe.

"You're awake," meowed a familiar voice and Nightstar saw Lichenstorm standing in the entrance of the den, Shellfur at his side. "You are so lucky you only lost one life."

"He's right," meowed Shellfur as he picked his way to Nightstar. "Taking on both badgers at once was immediate death. However, you saved your warriors, costing one of your nine lives."

Nightstar shrugged, pain sparking in her shoulders. "I did what I had to do." She meowed simply.

"*Had* to or *wanted* to?" Prompted Lichenstorm. "You died and the kits are barely two sunrises old. You need to be more careful." Nightstar glared at him and opened her mouth.

"You don't tell me what to do, Lichenstorm." She spat scathingly, seeing him flinch. "I'm alive, aren't I? The others are safe and in the end, I came back after giving up a life."

Shellfur butted in. "But in the end, Sparrowshadow and Tumblewatcher were killed and Leaffire is badly wounded." He stared at Nightstar, his eyes gleaming. "However, we did get some new Clanmates a few hours ago."

Nightstar tilted her head, causing pain to spark in her neck. "What do you mean?" She asked, ignoring the discomfort that consumed her body as she moved to a sitting up position.

Lichenstorm's eyes brightened. "Poppybee and Whiteblaze gave

birth when the patrols returned. They needed so much help, but it was worth it in the end." He meowed with a purr in his tone, tail flicking happily.

"How many kits are there?" Asked Nightstar, tail flicking impatiently.

Shellfur let out a purr. "Seven from Poppybee and Whiteblaze. In all, fifteen kits are in the Clan." He sounded tired but he held his head high. "It's wonderful how kits light up the Clan with their presence."

Nightstar nodded silently and rested her chin on her paws, looking at the two toms with false exhaustion. She faked a yawn and blinked slowly. "Well, off you go. I need some sleep after what happened."

"Of course," Lichenstorm dipped his head and retreated out of the den. Shellfur dipped his head to his leader and headed towards his nest, curling in a ball and falling asleep.

Nightstar watched the medicine cat's flank rise and fall as his breathing slowed and closed her eyes. It took a while for her to fall asleep. She didn't have a dream but instead, she felt a rush of cold, bitter air slice through her pelt like claws. Leafbare was here and soon, the snow would fall and cover the forest in a blanket of cold powder. She shivered absently and curled tightly in a ball, wishing for the cold to go away and leave her all alone. Just like how Thorntail left her with their kits.

Chapter Forty-Six

"Toss the moss, Hollykit!" Called Rosekit from the other side of the nursery. "You can't hog it forever!"

Hollykit huffed. "I wasn't going to, Rosekit!" She grumbled and tossed the moss ball in the air and watched as Dustkit leaped up and swatted it with his forepaw.

Emberkit crouched down, his haunches wiggling as he prepared to spring. "I've got this!" He meowed and lashed out with a paw as the moss headed for him.

Stonekit dove for the green ball, eyes shining as he kept it from hitting the ground in the nursery. "Heads up, Mistlekit!" He warned his sister as the moss reached for the sky and began to fall down to the ground.

Mistlekit reared on her hind legs and smacked the moss ball, making it go towards Petalkit, who was talking with Dustkit next to the corner of the den. "Look out, Petalkit!" She warned but the moss ball smacked her in the back of the head.

The kit whirled around and glared at her sister. "Watch it!" She hissed and tackled Petalkit, though she didn't hurt her. "Next time, I'll throw a moss ball at *your* head and see how *you* like it!"

"Calm down, Petalkit." Meowed Nightstar as she watched the eight kits play. "It was an accident and threats don't need to be shared."

Petalkit let out a grunt and got off her sister. "Fine, but I will." She meowed and turned away, heading back to Dustkit who was giggling.

The other six kittens looked at the leader with wide eyes. It had been a moon since Nightstar lost her first life and her kits grew quickly. They were roughly the same size, Emberkit being the largest and strongest of the three. Echospeck, Poppybee, and

Whiteblaze's kits grew quickly as well. Since they were around the same age, Nightstar and the other queens agreed to make them apprentices at the same time.

Hollykit didn't have her mother or her father's eyes at all. Nightstar was surprised at her kit bore bright green eyes when her siblings did not. Nonetheless, her daughter was fierce and proud of her eyes and was one of a kind.

Emberkit was living up to his name-sake pretty well, Nightstar noticed. He was hot-headed, fierce, and protective of his sisters in a way that was kind of like a mother fox to her cubs. His markings were exactly like his sisters' but lighter than Hollykit's. His eyes were a bright purple and Nightstar was pleased that they were a combination of hers and Thorntail's eyes.

Mosskit was more complicated and strange of her brother and sister. She was gray and white and smaller than Hollykit and Emberkit. Nevertheless, she strived to be like her mother and loved to be out of the nursery and begged to be let out into the camp. Along with her pelt, she had adoring orange eyes, just like her mother's but more orange than amber.

Nightstar was proud that her kits were shaping up to be great cats and soon, they would be apprentices and she would be free of the grasp of being a queen in the nursery. She liked being a leader with her Clanmates at her command. *Oh, Thorntail. If only you were here to watch them grow up with me, my love.* She thought, pain spreading through her heart.

A few sunrises ago was the Gathering and quite a lot had happened. Spiderstar was killed by greencough and Vixenpool was now Vixenstar. Honeyheart was moved into the nursery where she gave birth to Wolfstripe's kits, Lizardkit and Fallingkit. Nightstar was happy for her, though they were not close. She was glad she had started a family of her own. Frostgaze was named as deputy and Vixenstar concluded her report.

Next was Swiftstar, who looked a bit frail but he insisted that he was fine. He reported that all was well in GlacierClan and there was nothing else. Nightstar remembered his ribs sticking out like

mountain peaks against the bold cream sky.

Eeltail gave her report, saying Blackstar was too sick to come to the Gathering and how Dusthawk will be getting an apprentice sooner than they thought he would. When she looked at Nightstar, the leader gave her report.

"DawnClan is doing very well this leafbare. Our nursery is crawling with kits and we have our paws full with keeping them busy and fed." She'd said, earning cheers of congratulations and warm purrs. "Sadly, Hollowstream died a few sunrises ago and his spirit rests in StarClan. Tumblewatcher and Sparrowshadow were killed during a badger attack so beware of the two badgers." Nightstar had given the leaders a respectful nod. "This concludes this moon's Gathering. Please go to your respective leader and leave."

Now that her kits were a moon old and could explore a bit, Nightstar spent more time giving orders and going hunting every now and then. Her kits were very happy to see her and boasted about who would become the next leader.

Nightstar sighed, gazing at her kits as they began to play hide-and-seek. She closed her eyes briefly before opening them again. She rose to her paws and nodded to Halfsnow, who had recently given birth to her own three kits.

Snowkit was the color of snow. She acted dainty and loved to keep her fur soft and clean. Her dazzling blue eye was sharp and her yellow eye was keen on watching. However, she was deaf in the ear that her blue eye was. That didn't seem to stop her from being the best out of her siblings and her denmates.

Branchkit was more of the bully and leader of his generation. He was a dark honey-brown tabby tom with broad shoulders and large paws. His eyes, which her a striking blue, stood out like a clump of snow on a greenleaf day. He was very proud and cocky and constantly proved himself to be stronger than his sisters.

Patchkit was quieter than her siblings, being the only one to not shout and speak unless spoken to. Her fur was very strange but it was beautiful. Brown with white patches surprised Nightstar and

the rest of the Clan when she was born. Her eyes were a bright yellow like the sun.

Poppybee's kits were strong and active as well. Three sons were born to the she-cat and she looked overwhelmed but loved her sons no matter what.

Gingerkit was trying to make his presence in the Clan known from the moment he was born by screeching loud enough for NightClan to hear. He was the happiest of the trio and he often kept every cats' spirits up.

Firekit was more reserved and kept to himself. That's to say when his brothers aren't around. At only a moon or so old, the tabby kitten was as playful as ever and loved to play hide-and-seek, moss ball, or Warrior and Mouse.

Adderkit was the serious kit out of his brothers and watched whenever they played games. His keen sight and sharp hearing made Timberskip and Shellfur's interests shoot through the roof of their den. Although he isn't terribly active in playing games, he loves his kin and would do anything to make them proud.

Even Whiteblaze's kits were a litter of four, much to the shock of the Clan. Two she-cats and two toms was a pawful to say the least. Whiteblaze didn't let them out of her sight and frequently fussed and worried about their pelts and safety.

Goosekit was the first to be born and he made sure all his denmates and siblings knew it. Often boasting about how he'll be made an apprentice before Nightstar *thinks* of his three siblings. He is very stoic and proves to be like Larkflight in some aspects.

Copperkit is the least concerned about how her brother is barely older than her. She loves being out of the nursery and chases just about everything she can get her tiny claws into.

Lilykit and Streamkit were pretty much the same cat but with different names and appearances. Both of them are reserved and self-conscious about what they do and how they act. Lilykit is a bit more cheerful than her younger brother but the two kits do

everything together.

Nightstar was shocked at how many kits were in the nursery all at one time and even had the warriors expand the nursery to fit all of them. Nonetheless, her Clan was growing and it was a treat to watch.

Chapter Forty-Seven

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Yowled Nightstar, furious with her tail lashing to and fro. As her Clan gathered, she went on. "OakClan has stolen prey from us for the last time! It's time we show those flea-bitten mange-pelts not to take our prey!"

Cheering reached her ears as her Clanmates yowled their approval and anger. For several days, Nightstar's former Clan had been stealing large amounts of prey and leaving DawnClan to starve. Even though they were a moon into leafbare, every piece of prey they could catch mattered in feeding the future of the Clan.

Nightstar lashed her tail and unsheathed her claws, allowing them to scrape against the stone she perched on. "We will attack at once!" She declared and looked around the clearing. From the nursery, the kits were watching with wide, excited gazes and she shook her head. The kits were eager for battle, sure, but they'd die in their first skirmish. "Lichenstorm will take the first patrol consisting of Leopardcoat, Birdwatcher, Larkflight, and Sparrowflower. Robinfire, you will lead the second patrol with Stormbird, Thornbite, Dewpath, and Goldenpatch." She looked around. "The rest of the warriors will come with me and a few of you will stay behind and protect the kits."

Fennelfur and Leaffire stood up. "We will help the queens protect the nursery." Meowed Fennelfur, tail flicking. "However, two of the queens shouldn't be in the battle in case they get severely hurt."

Echospeck let out a snarl and Poppybee hissed. "We will fight for the kits no matter what!" Growled Poppybee, tail lashing. "OakClan has taken away precious prey that was supposed to be used to feed the bellies of our kits."

Nightstar nodded and leaped down into the mass of her warriors. "Let's go!" She ordered and swiftly trotted out of the camp, her Clan behind her.

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As they neared OakClan's territory, Nightstar felt memories of her exile flooding through her. She was suddenly inside the camp she called home for most of her life, performing warrior duties alongside Dawnflame and Songscratch. Nightstar shook her head and leaped over the stream that separated the two territories. *No longer am I one of them.* She reminded herself as she led her warriors into the dense forest. The trees had lost most of their leaves and looked bare and jagged against the cloudy sky. Blood would be spilled today. The blood of her former Clanmates.

Lichenstorm and Robinfire split up and took their groups the long way to the OakClan camp, going in opposite directions. Nightstar unsheathed her claws and flicked her ears, seeing two cats at the entrance of the camp. Poppybee and Echospeck sprinted forward and tackled their enemies, slashing their ears.

Nightstar threw her head back. "DawnClan warriors, attack!" She yowled and charged into the camp, her Clan on her heels. At once, a full-on battle broke out and she stood in the middle of it. In front of her stood Volepelt, the cat who was named after Voletuft.

"You," snarled the tom as he lunged at Nightstar. "You traitor!" Nightstar easily dodged a blow to the cheek and kicked his side with her hind leg. She raked her claws down the length of his side and heard him yelp in pain as blood welled at the wound.

"Spiderstar exiled me for the death of Tawnywillow, one that I did not cause." She snarled and snapped her jaws at his tail that whisked by. "Goldenfire was a gullible apprentice when I trained him. *He* is the one who killed the deputy, not me."

Volepelt hissed as claws raked his ears and slashed Nightstar's face. "You expect me to believe you?" He sneered and leaped to the side as the leader lashed out with a paw, aiming for his muzzle. "Tawnywillow was a noble warrior and deputy, she did not deserve to die at your claws."

Nightstar smirked and shoved the warrior away, making him stagger. She lunged at him and pinned him to the ground, teeth

bared in a malicious grin. "Noble warriors are destined to die in battle. Some sooner than others." With one final swipe, she slashed open Volepelt's throat and watched as blood gushed from his neck. Raising her paw, she licked her claws and looked around.

The battle raged on around her and she relished the screeching and yowling of pain and rage. Nightstar saw movement and she noticed no cat guarding the nursery. Smirking, she slithered through wrestling cats and slid inside. Honeyheart was tangled outside with Robinfire and Larkflight so Nightstar could easily slip right in. Scanning the nests of moss, she spotted two pairs of gleaming eyes and smiled.

"Come on out, kits." She cooed, crouching down and reaching out a paw. "I won't hurt you. I know a place where no cat can find you." One of the kits crawled towards her, his dark blue eyes wide and scared.

"W-where are you going to take us?" He whimpered as the other kits followed, eyes scared. "W-we can't leave our mother."

Nightstar looked over her shoulder and saw Honeyheart being struck by Larkflight. She looked back at the kits and shook her head in false sadness. "Your mother is dead, kits." At their open mouths, she went on. "Come with me and my Clan and I can keep you safe. You are not safe here with all this fighting."

The she-cat nodded slightly and Nightstar picked her up by the scruff with her brother on her back. "Hang on," warned the leader as she turned tail and strode out of the nursery. No cat seemed to notice the leader with the kits and Nightstar inwardly smirked as she slipped through a gap in the bramble wall and saw Poppybee limping out of the battle. "Poppybee!" She meowed through the kits' scruff.

The queen saw her and her eyes widened. "What are you doing?" She hissed, seeing the kits.

Nightstar set the she-cat down and explained. "They are not safe here. They are coming back with us so they don't get hurt." Poppybee looked suspicious.

"What about their mother?" She asked, tail flicking. The kits looked at the she-cat, eyes wide with awe.

"Dead," Nightstar lied and took the tom off her back. "Take them to camp while I check on the others. Don't let them out of your sight!" She called as she raced back towards the noise of battle.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Blood was everywhere in OakClan's camp. Nightstar spotted Frostgaze and Lichenstorm brawling not far from Larkflight and Honeyheart. All four cats looked terribly exhausted and Nightstar willed her Clan to keep fighting. *If we win this, it will begin at last.* She thought as she looked around for Vixenstar.

The OakClan leader was nowhere in sight. Movement caught her attention as she saw Robinfire and Sparrowflower slipping out of the elder's den, their paws bloody and eyes glowing. *They've killed Toadpad and Mistyflake.* She mused and saw Vixenstar taking on Dewpath and Stormbird. Nightstar smirked and bounded towards the three, letting out a snarl as she reached them.

Vixenstar fixed her with her blue glare. "Nightstar," she snarled and lashed out with a paw, slicing open the other leader's cheek. "How wonderful you show your face here again."

Nightstar sneered. "Just how I remember it: weak and too feeble to defend themselves." The black leader lunged at the leader and forced her to the ground, hitting her head on a rock. Vixenstar glared up at her, blood trickling out of her mouth and painting the stone crimson.

"Stronger than you," she retorted and Nightstar sank her claws into the fur around her neck. "What will Spiderstar think?"

Nightstar leaned towards the leader, her breath brushing her cheek. "He would be thinking about how horrible of an idea it was by exiling me." She snickered softly and raised her head, nodding to Dewpath. "Kill her."

The tom looked shocked but nodded and raised a paw, claws glinting in the weak sunlight. He brought down his paw and slashed open the she-cat's throat. Vixenstar gasped in pain but the light faded from her eyes and she fell limp beneath Nightstar's bloodstained paws.

She smiled evilly and turned to the clearing where her warriors were winning the fight. "Kill them!" Nightstar yowled. "Kill them all!"

As the cries of battle ceased, she saw many of her warriors standing over injured or dead warriors. Nightstar smirked and flicked her tail as Vixenstar returned from the dead. She threw her towards the edge of the rock. "Look at your Clan, Vixen*pool*." She sneered as the she-cat saw with wide eyes the bloody scene. "You've lost."

Vixenstar looked down and Nightstar grinned. "Then what, Nightstar?" She asked softly, looking up at the she-cat. "You won the battle, what now?"

Nightstar slashed her cheek, grinning wildly. "Now, you are under *my* command." She flicked her ear to Stormbird. "Rally up the rest of the warriors and escort them to DawnClan camp. Those who fight back, kill them on the spot." She meowed and watched as her ally dipped her head and started barking out orders.

Vixenstar bowed her head, eyes closed. "StarClan will not like what you are doing, Nightstar." She rasped. "This is the end."

"That's where you are wrong, Vixenpool." Nightstar put a paw of unsheathed claws under her chin and forced her to meet her gaze. "This is only the beginning."

"Of what?" Vixenpool asked, eyes glinting with defeat and exhaustion. "The beginning of what, Nightstar?"

Nightstar raised her chin and pointed her nose to the sky. "The beginning of my rise." She meowed and looked down at the she-cat. "And if any cat dares stand in my way and stop me, they will meet the same fate of Blackheart, the kittypet, Tawnywillow, Rowantail, Volepelt, Voletuft, and countless other cats."

Vixenpool's eyes widened and she lowered her head as Nightstar padded past her. Nightstar strode towards the camp entrance, feeling mighty and proud. She now had control of two Clans instead of one. *That's the path she will walk until she is ready to die. This kit walks a dark path and no cat can stop her.*

Chapter Forty-Nine

Nightstar grinned widely as she left her den and saw the OakClan cats being snapped at by the DawnClan warriors. A few days passed since she took over OakClan and she made it clear any disobedience would result in punishment or death. Sure, leafbare was in full swing and there was fresh snow on the ground, but her Clan was thriving! Instead of two medicine cats, they now had three and the herb store had doubled. Both deputies, Frostgaze and Lichenstorm, worked well together despite being wary of each other. They sent out twice as many hunting and border patrols and there was always prey in the pine forest or the oak forest. *This is how Clans should live, Nightstar.* Whispered the voice of Badgershade, making her paws tingle. *But, we have much to discuss.*

With Honeyheart dead and Wolfstripe being distant with his kits since her death, Lizardkit and Fallingkit have been living well in the nursery with the other kits. At around the same age, they were as energetic as the others. Nightstar noticed Wolfstripe often looking at Robinfire and hanging out with her more often than not.

Nightstar watched as her large Clan went on with their day, as though the addition of OakClan never occurred. However, she noticed that some of the warriors, OakClan and DawnClan alike, were speaking to each other in the corner by the camp entrance. With so many cats, most of the warriors had to expand the camp to fit all the new Clan. Hearing squeaking by the nursery, Nightstar turned her head and saw the kits playing with a pebble, heading for a group of OakClan cats.

Redstripe was the first to notice the kits and pricked his ears, his eyes soft and gentle like a feather. Nightstar watched closely, wondering if the other warriors would attack the kits that shared the same blood as those around them. Instead, he crouched down and swatted the pebble towards the nursery, where the kits squealed in delight and charged after it.

As he watched them go, Redstripe caught Nightstar's watching eye

and met her gaze. Nightstar cocked her head and saw the tom hold her gaze until Blueheart nudged him. As he looked away, Nightstar felt something burn in her chest. The way the warrior held her gaze reminded her of his father. Apple could hold the gaze of a mother fox and not flinch. Nightstar rose to her paws and parted her jaws.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" She announced, seeing many warriors turn their heads and start to flock to her call. Watching her warriors, she felt a swell of power course through her body as they looked up at her with curiosity and wonder of what she would say. Frostgaze and Lichenstorm turned their heads and bounded to their positions and watched each cat closely.

"What's this about, Nightstar?" Called Dewpath from the medicine den, his wounds patched with green herbs and cobwebs. Most of the warriors who fought in the battle were like that. "The kits aren't three moons old yet, are they?"

Vixenpool gasped, staring at him in shock. "You train kits at *three moons old*?" At Dewpath's nod, she looked up at Nightstar. "That's against the Warrior Code!"

Redstripe looked at his mother, flicking his tail across her shoulders to relax her. "Mother," he meowed. "The Warrior Code was changed seasons ago. Kits get too big when they reach six moons and they are weaned from their mother's milk at around two-and-a-half moons old."

Vixenpool looked stunned as she gazed at her son. "But then kits are being sent into battle when they are supposed to be suckling at the curve of their mother's belly!" She shrieked and Redstripe looked around.

"Vixenpool," it was Swiftsoul who spoke this time, his voice gentle. "Why don't we get you to a nest and some poppy seeds? You need to sleep." He suggested and padded to his former leader, who let out a hiss and swiped a paw at him.

Nightstar lashed her tail. "Redstripe and Dawnflame," she meowed sharply. "Deal with her and remove her from this meeting. She is

wasting time blabbering about nonsense."

Both warriors nodded, though they looked skeptical as they led a raving Vixenpool away into the medicine cat den. The rest of the cats followed them with curious eyes before looking back up at Nightstar.

"As I was about to say," she meowed. "With our growing Clan, we need to do something about the other two Clans." Nightstar unsheathed a paw of claws and raised it, gazing thoughtfully at it. "Any suggestions?"

Songscratch raised his tail, eyes glimmering with fire. "I suggest that we attack NightClan first, take over, then force GlacierClan to surrender." He meowed.

Goldenfire rose to his paws, nodding. "With three Clans under your control, GlacierClan would have no choice other than to give in." He meowed, unsheathing his claws.

Murmurs of agreement ran throughout the Clan and Nightstar rose to her paws, silencing the mutters. "Very well," she meowed. "Songscratch, you will take Goldenfire, Marigoldscar, Amberheart, Appleclaw, Ivyheart, Iceleaf, Graywolf, and Wolfstripe with you to attack NightClan first." She meowed, only to be interrupted by a hiss.

Marigoldscar sprang to her paws, tail lashing as she glared up at Nightstar. "I will *not* help you take over two Clans, Nightstar!" She objected furiously. "They are cats just like us and deserve to be treated as such." She turned to the cats around her, who watched her with wary and shock. "Don't you see that this is a bad idea? Nightstar is *evil* and taking over the other Clans will only fuel her!"

"Perhaps you're right, Marigoldscar," Nightstar mused, looking at the angered she-cat. "But then again, that's why being evil is fun." She laughed. "Being the vilest cat in the Clans is what I was *destined* to be! StarClan says so, they even told me as such." The leader turned to Lichenstorm, who met her gaze. Raising her paw of unsheathed claws, she sheathed all but one. Putting it to her neck but about a mouse-length away from the flesh, she drew an

invisible line across her throat and Lichenstorm nodded, understanding.

Without a word, he sprang at Marigoldscar, making her hiss as she was thrown to the ground. Lichenstorm's shoulder erupted with blood as the she-cat slashed her claws across it and he growled in pain, lashing a paw against her chest.

Cheers filled the air, the birdsong to Nightstar's shredded ears as she eagerly watched the oncoming slaughter. Her deputy sank his teeth into Marigoldscar's shoulder and heaved her across the clearing, making her roll in the grass. She struggled to get up, only to be pinned to the ground by the deputy. Lichenstorm lunged at her throat, biting down hard. She screeched in pain but it faded away as she fell limp beneath his paws.

Nightstar smirked and gazed at her Clan. "As I was saying," she meowed as though Marigoldscar's execution hadn't happened. "Leaffire, you will lead the second group. Fennelfur, Poolheart, Lakefur, Leopardcoat, Larkflight, Birdwatcher, Frostgaze, and Lichenstorm with you. And finally, I will lead the third group. Sparrowflower, Thornbite, Goldenpatch, Shadeheart, Pebblewhisker, Blueheart, Owlflight, Swiftsoul, Wildwing, Sedgepelt, and Rowanflower will come with me. The rest of you will guard the camp."

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Nightstar's tail flicked, making Goldenfire and Leaffire split apart and go opposite directions and heading towards the NightClan camp. Nightstar's paws tingled with excitement as they neared the place that would soon erupt in yowls of pain.

As they neared, Nightstar's pelt prickled with unease and uncertainty that she masked by shaking out her pelt. Was this the right thing to do? Was Marigoldscar right in accusing her of being evil? She shook her head with a growl. *All that I'm doing is for the good of all four Clans. So what if a pawful of warriors die? It'll all be for the better in the end.* Nightstar and her group grew closer and closer to the camp and she was surprised to see no cats guarding the entrance. Not letting her surprise get to her, she flicked her ear

and charged right in the camp.

She was shocked at what she saw. The camp was bare, free of any signs of the Clan that lived there. Nightstar looked around and saw the brambles quiver by one of the dens and she stiffened. "Ambush!" She yowled, unsheathing her claws.

Everything was a blur as countless cats flew towards the DawnClan and OakClan cats. One of the blurs, Nightstar recognized as Lionstorm, crashed right into her. The leader grunted and sank her hind claws into the dirt as she reared and slashed his face.

Lionstorm stumbled as Nightstar fell back on all fours and growled. "Why are you here?" He spat, tail lashing as he glared at Nightstar. "NightClan has done nothing to you!" He flew out a paw and struck her leg, making her hiss.

Nightstar sprang to the side as Lionstorm leaped, snarling. "You have no idea what your *Clan* has done to me, warrior." She felt a searing pain flash up her tail and she yowled in agony as Lionstorm sank his teeth in, not letting go. She reared on her hind legs and slammed her front paws on the ground, kicking out with her legs and kicking the tom away. The golden tabby warrior rolled on his side and sprang to his paws, hissing. "Your Clan brought me nothing but pain and misery. Even as a little kit."

His gray eyes widened and his hackles faltered. "We didn't *do* anything." He protested, dodging a paw to the cheek. "Swiftflake did everything he could to save Specklewatcher, Leopardkit, and Silverkit." Lionstorm bared his teeth and went on. "Blackheart and Specklewatcher are the ones who-"

Nightstar shrieked and charged at the tom, barreling into him and pinning him to the ground. Lionstorm stared up at her in fear and shock, making Nightstar inwardly purr. "My parents did nothing but create someone full of power and greatness." She meowed, claws digging into his chest. "I am the daughter of two foolish cats who fell in love out of spite. And yet, they paid the price with their lives." Without anything left to say to the tom, Nightstar bit down on his throat and waited until he stopped moving.

She let go, feeling power course through her veins as the battle halted around her and the NightClan cats were badly beaten and outnumbered. Movement flickered by one of the dens and she turned her head to see Eeltail dragging the body of Larkflight out of what looked like the apprentice's den.

The cry of Sparrowflower made the tom's death seem more dramatic. Nightstar shook her paws and watched Eeltail and Blackstar glare at her.

"Well?" Demanded the deputy of NightClan. "Explain why you invade our home and take the lives of so many cats."

There was a flash of brown tabby fur as Frostgaze stood at Nightstar's side, hissing. "Nightstar doesn't need an explanation!" She retorted and Nightstar was pleased that the she-cat defended her.

"That's quite alright, Frostgaze." She purred and brushed by the she-cat. Nightstar sized up the deputy, only a whisker taller than the leader. "Eeltail, you know the affair between NightClan and OakClan, don't you?"

Eeltail's fur spiked on her neck and she let out a low growl. "Choose what you say next very carefully, Night*star*." She warned, tail lashing.

The leader went on breezily. "The affair between Blackheart and Specklewatcher is a tale no cat has forgotten." Nightstar allowed her claws to unsheathe as she spoke, keeping her tone flat and authoritative. "Why have disloyal cats among our ranks, when we can have strong, loyal cats within the walls of one camp at all times?"

Eeltail narrowed her eyes and Blackstar watched Nightstar closely. "You want the Clans to join as one," she spat. "Good luck with that."

Nightstar purred silkily. "I don't need luck, Eeltail." She meowed and flicked her tail over her head. "I have StarClan on my side, along with the strength of three Clans."

Blackstar tilted his head, eyes confused. "Three?" He asked and his gaze flicked around at the cats who bared their teeth. Realization sank into his eyes and he looked at Nightstar in horror and regret. "You will take control of my Clan over my dead body!"

Nightstar smirked, leaning forward. "It will be my genuine pleasure, Blackstar." She meowed and bounded towards the tom, who crouched down, bracing himself. Nightstar crashed into the tom, sending him rearing on his hind legs and clawing at her ears. Nightstar slashed at his exposed belly, hearing him cry out in pain as he stumbled back and fell onto all four paws.

"Blackstar!" Yowled Eeltail, rushing forward only to be blocked by Frostgaze and Leaffire. "No!"

Nightstar circled the tom, grinning from ear to ear. "You were deputy when Specklewatcher gave birth to me and my siblings, Blackstar." She drawled, dragging out his name as his ears fell. "The Blackdust back then did nothing to stop the relationship from expanding, did he?"

Blackstar looked at the ground. "Well, no." He mumbled and Nightstar lashed out with a paw and slashed his shoulder. The tom yelped and looked at the she-cat, panting.

"You were one of the cats who saw Specklewatcher's dead body, weren't you?" She sneered, tail flicking. "Blood pooling around her as she bled to death."

Eeltail spoke up, shock lacing her voice. "How would you know that?" She demanded, eyes wide and hurt. "You were a newborn when Specklewatcher and your siblings died. How would you know how your mother died?"

Nightstar waved her tail dismissively. "In any case, a cat who does not stop forbidden relationships should not be called a leader." She looked around at her cats and spotted Songscratch with Blueheart and Owlflight. "Songscratch," she meowed and watched the tom straighten. "Kill Blackstar."

The light brown tabby tom nodded once and crossed the clearing in

a few bounds before he clashed with the NightClan tom. In an instant, Blackstar was pinned to the ground, teeth fastened in his throat.

"This," Nightstar gestured with her paw to the two cats, "is what happens to those who oppose me or stand in my way." Eeltail looked broken as her leader lost a life right in front of her. Nightstar saw the sorrow and grief in her eyes and grinned wickedly. "Frostgaze and Leaffire, kill her too."

Chapter Fifty

"Nightstar," meowed a far away voice that was unfamiliar to Nightstar. "Nightstar, open your eyes." The voice grew impatient. "Nightstar!"

The black she-cat's head shot up, blinking as a StarClan spirit stood in front of her. "About time," the spirit grunted and looked around. "Come with me, we don't have a lot of time."

Nightstar scrambled to her paws and examined the cat in front of her. "Who are you? Why am I here?" She asked, tail flicking behind her.

The multi-colored calico huffed in annoyance and held up a paw to stop the questions. "My name is Dapplefern and I need to speak with you." She meowed briskly and strode away with Nightstar scrambling after her.

"About?" Nightstar prompted as they headed through a lush green forest. She looked around, the ground feeling oddly familiar beneath her battle-worn paws. The trees loomed higher than the clouds and reached to the stars where the land of StarClan resided. It was around sunhigh as Dapplefern led Nightstar further into the thick forest. "Where are you taking me?"

Dapplefern didn't look at her as she replied, her starry pelt shimmering. "To where you will die," she meowed darkly and Nightstar stiffened. The spirit noticed and shook her head. "I can't kill you in your dreams, Nightstar." She explained and pressed on until a bramble wall came into view. Just in earshot was the sound of screeching, making Nightstar recoil and flatten her ears.

"Who is making that awful sound?" She asked, looking at the calico she-cat. Yellow eyes locked onto hers and Nightstar felt uncomfortable as Dapplefern twitched her ear.

"You," she meowed simply and ducked into the wall of brambles

and thorns that clung to Nightstar's pelt. When they emerged on the other side, Nightstar nearly gasped at what she saw. Cats, all hissing and snarling, surrounded a black pelt, backing away from what awaited them. With a jolt, Nightstar realized that the black shape was *her.* This cat was backed up against the Towering Oak in the Gathering Hollow, surrounded by hissing and angry cats.

"What are they doing?" Nightstar demanded, looking at Dapplefern, who looked ahead. "Why are they turning on me?"

Dapplefern looked at her, eyes unreadable. "Isn't it obvious?" She asked, jerking her muzzle around her. "You've made their lives a nightmare to live. You took control of their Clans and now, they want the same blood you do now. However, the only blood that will be spilled is yours." She waved a cream paw.

Nightstar stood in front of her, teeth bared. "What I'm doing is for the *good* of the Clans!" She protested but the she-cat ignored her. "By making them one, I'm saving lives!"

"But taking countless others in the process, Nightstar," Dapplefern growled and shoved the she-cat towards the group of cats Nightstar called her Clan. "Watch what will happen to you."

Nightstar obeyed and saw a familiar gray and white pelt advancing towards the Nightstar backed against the Towering Oak. *Mosskit.* She thought, watching as her daughter snarled at her.

"You made our lives horrible, Nightstar." Spat the she-cat that suckled at Nightstar's belly. "You take over our homes and say it's the will of StarClan!"

A tortoiseshell she-cat stepped forward, as did an identical tom. Nightstar recognized them both immediately as Hollykit and Emberkit. *What are their warrior names?* She wondered but a hiss broke into her thoughts.

"Would our father go along with this, Nighstar?" Asked her son, eyes flashing with hurt. "Thorntail would never let you do this to his Clan."

Nightstar watched herself arch her back and lash out with a paw, slashing her son's cheek. "Thorntail died before you three were *born*!" She snarled, eyes wild and crazed. "This is *my* Clan, not his!"

"He would've led it better than you could ever!" Yowled a familiar voice and Nightstar saw Lichenstorm baring his teeth. "You came here, boasting about how you ran away all those moons ago. When in reality, you killed innocent cats and got exiled!" His fur bristled and Nightstar stiffened. "You are no leader who follows StarClan!"

Dapplefern said nothing as they watched the Clan advance forward until they pounced on the leader, who let out a deafening shriek as they tore her apart. Nightstar shut her eyes and looked away, cringing at the yowls and wails of pain filled her ears. "This is what will happen in the future, Nightstar." The spirit meowed, staring down the she-cat. "And there is nothing you can do to prevent it."

Chapter Fifty-One

Nightstar jerked awake, startled by her dream. She panted as her kits growled in protest and shifted. Shaking her head, she rose to her paws and exited the nursery. It was early in the morning, but there were cats already awake in the camp. Some were clustered the deputies, eager to get on a patrol. Blackstar, now Blackdust, named Squirrelsplash as his deputy when Eeltail was killed. Nightstar felt uncomfortable as she watched the Clan she ruled shuffle through the camp, which was even more crowded than it was sheltering two Clans rather than three.

This is what will happen in the future, Nightstar. Dapplefern had said. *And there is nothing you can do to prevent it.* The calico StarClan spirit was very flat in what *might* happen to Nightstar. That alone unsettled the leader as she recalled her own kits turning on her. *Mosskit, Emberkit, and Hollykit would never do that. Would they?* She shook her head and sighed, climbing up the Jagged Stone. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" *This seems like something I have to do every day.* She thought with a groan.

As her large Clan gathered, she couldn't help but glance over at the nursery and see all the kits poking their heads out to see what was going on. *They're probably wondering why the meetings happen so often.* Nightstar mused and flicked her tail.

"In naming apprentices, we show ourselves that we are always growing and getting stronger." Nightstar saw the kits straighten and she gestured for them to come forward. *This is going to take a while.* She thought, stifling a groan of annoyance. "Rosekit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Rosepaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Stormbird. She is a great hunter and talented fighter and I know she will pass on to Rosepaw."

The dark tabby she-cat dipped her head to Nightstar and crossed the clearing to her new apprentice. They exchanged a few words

that Nightstar couldn't catch before touching noses and sitting down in the crowd.

"Petalkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Petalpaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Robinfire." Nightstar saw her friend brighten and she almost purred with amusement. "She is a playful warrior and firm cat and I know that she will teach you all she knows."

Robinfire let out a loud purr and padded towards her new apprentice, eyes gleaming with both pride and sadness. *She was close with Petalfire before all this happened.* She recalled but went on briskly.

"Dustkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Dustpaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Songscratch." The apprentice looked surprised and so did the golden warrior but Nightstar flicked her tail. "He is a fierce warrior in the heat of battle and quick to react. I know he will teach you how to be just that as your mentor."

Dustpaw looked at the golden tabby tom as he padded across the clearing and touched noses with the smaller tom. He looked excited as he sat down next to his new mentor, tail flicking eagerly.

"Mistlekit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Mistlepaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Swiftsoul." The black and white spotted tom looked surprised. "He is a swift and spirited warrior and I know he will pass those traits onto Mistlepaw."

The dark blue-gray tabby apprentice's blue eyes lit with excitement and joy as she bounded towards her mentor before he could stand up. She practically tackled him as she touched noses with him, the cats around them letting out purrs of amusement.

Nightstar locked eyes with Redstripe, where he was sitting next to Blueheart and Shelltail and held his gaze. "Stonekit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Stonepaw." Redstripe's tail flicked behind him and Nighstar wondered if he could read her thoughts. "The mentor I

have chosen for you is Redstripe." That got the tom to blink, breaking their everlasting eye contact. "He is a wise warrior and caring for those younger than him and I trust that he will teach you to be exactly that."

Stonepaw watched eagerly as Redstripe picked his way to his new apprentice. As they touched noses, Nightstar saw her own three kits peering at her with eager and wonder. *Who will be their mentors?* As Redstripe and Stonepaw sat down, she carried on.

"Hollykit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Hollypaw." Nightstar paused, looking around the clearing full of cats. "The mentor I have chosen for you is Goldenfire. He is a fierce warrior and knows how to treat those outside our border. I know he will pass on all he knows onto Hollypaw."

Her daughter shot to her paws as Goldenfire padded towards her and touched his nose to her forehead. *Just like during my nine lives ceremony.* She recalled and shook her head. *She's only an apprentice.* Nightstar reminded herself and twitched her ear. "Emberkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Emberpaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Leaffire."

Her former apprentice looked at her in shock and Nightstar gave her a slight nod. "She is a skilled hunter and wonderful fighter and I know she will pass on those traits onto Emberpaw." The she-cat wasted no time in rushing forward and touching noses to Nightstar's son before sitting back down.

Nightstar caught her breath as she examined Mosskit. *Perhaps I should mentor her.* She thought and flexed her claws. "Mosskit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Mosspaw. I will be your mentor."

Muffled gasps from the apprentice and the warriors met Nightstar's ears and she flicked her tail, beckoning her daughter and apprentice to sit in the crowd.

"Kin don't mentor kin!" Hissed Shadowstream from next to

Moonwish and Jaggedsong.

"What was that, Shadowstream?" Prompted Nightstar, startling the warrior. "Speak up next time. If you have something to say to your littermates, you can say it to the entire Clan."

That seemed to shut up any other mutters that filled the air and Nightstar smirked inwardly. She went on without skipping a beat. "Gingerkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Gingerpaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Thistlespirit. I hope he passes on all he knows onto Gingerpaw."

The large gray and white NightClan warrior rose to his large paws and padded towards the small cat. His eyes were unreadable as he touched noses with Gingerpaw. The apprentice looked slightly scared of his mentor as they sat down, the warrior looming over the apprentice.

"Firekit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Firepaw." Nightstar whisked her tail, suppressing a yawn. "The mentor I chose for you is Leopardcoat. I hope he passes on all he knows onto Firepaw."

The leopard-furred tom looked pleased as he rose to his paws and padded towards his new apprentice. As they touched noses, Leopardcoat winked at Nightstar, who rolled her eyes playfully.

Nightstar went on with the ceremony, naming Adderkit as Adderpaw and giving him Snowmask, a NightClan she-cat, as his mentor. Both cats looked glad as they sat down next to each other, sitting rather close.

Goosekit was named as Goosepaw and now had Rowanflower, Halfthroat and Ivyheart's daughter, as his mentor. Nightstar's lip curled as she said the first part of the she-cat's name. *What Rowantail did is not Rowanflower's fault.* She reminded herself, which did little to remove the bitter taste in her mouth.

Copperkit was now Copperpaw and had Sneezesong as her mentor. The two's personalities complemented the other's very nicely and it

made their bond as mentor and apprentice very satisfying to watch.

Lilykit was now Lilypaw and, much to the surprise of the rest of the Clan took the path of a medicine cat. With three mentors, her full name would come sooner than later.

Streampaw was now training under Shelltail, one of the Clan's best fishers. From looking at how they sat and acted, they seemed rather close already. *And he just became an apprentice.*

Snowpaw, with her different colored eyes, got Sedgepelt as her mentor. Nightstar thought that their shared defect, being deaf in the side that their blue eye was on, they would bond and become really close.

As for the other four apprentices, it was easy to get their mentors. Branchpaw got Brokenflower, who was really strict. Patchpaw got Snakefang, one of the most fierce cats in the entire Clan. Lizardpaw got Fennelfur and Fallingpaw got Dewpath.

As Nightstar dismissed the Clan, Mosspaw bounded up to her, already bouncing on her paws as she waited to know what they would do for the day.

"Exploring? Hunting? Battling? Patrolling?" Her daughter blabbered, prancing around.

Nightstar cuffed her ear, making her squeak and quiet down. "First, we will be exploring the territory." She meowed and she could tell Mosspaw was hiding her excitement. "After that, we need to collect some more moss for our nests since leafbare is here."

Mosspaw nodded eagerly. "Okay!" She chirped and Nightstar couldn't help but smile. "Where do we go first?"

Nightstar headed for the camp entrance where the other mentors and apprentices were filing out in a line. "First, we leave the camp and then we go to the Weeping Grove."

Mosspaw followed, yapping about how much fun she was going to have during her apprenticeship. Nightstar didn't stop her from talking while they split away from the other mentors and

apprentices. *Thorntail, she has your spirit.* She thought as her and her daughter slid into the forest.

Chapter Fifty-Two

"This is the Glowing Moss Cave, Mosspaw." Meowed Nightstar as she and her apprentice passed the ancient cave. "That's where we will collect more moss after this."

The gray and white patched apprentice gaped at the cave, tail lashing in excitement and wonder. "Wow!" She breathed, her orange eyes wide. Mosspaw turned to her mother, head tilted to the side. "Why is it called the Glowing Moss Cave?" She asked.

Nightstar chuckled. "Because when the sunlight or moonlight hits the moss inside just right, it glows." She explained and Mosspaw's eyes widened like a full moon. "It's a beautiful sight to see, but it's nothing compared to the Moonpool."

Mosspaw flicked her tail and sat down. "What does the Moonpool look like?" She asked. "Is it inside the Glowing Moss Cave?"

Nightstar shook her head, amused. "Certainly not," she chuckled, jerking her muzzle beyond the trees. "It's in a cave in the crevices of highstones. I went there to receive my nine lives and it is gorgeous."

"What's it look like?" Mosspaw was lying down, listening intensely as though the Moonpool would disappear before she got to see it.

The leader sat down, tail flicking over her paws as she began to explain. "It a pool in the ground that reflects the stars when the moonlight shines down on it through the gap where you enter." She meowed. Unsheathing a claw, Nightstar drew a basic description of the ancient pool. "When you go to it, you crouch down and lap at the water."

Mosspaw broke it. "Is it warm or cold?" She asked, wiggling closer to her mother.

"Very, very cold." Purred Nightstar as she saw Mosspaw's mouth open. "However, the pool has never been frozen over before." She

caught the question before her apprentice had to ask. "And I don't think it has or ever will." She added.

Mosspaw was quiet for a few heartbeats before asking. "Will I ever see it?" She gazed at her mother, tail flicking back and forth.

Nightstar shrugged. "In time you may see it. If you become a leader, you will see it to get your nine lives." She meowed and rose to her paws. "Come on, we'd better keep going before the sun starts to set."

Mosspaw sprang up and her energy returned. "Will you tell me more about the territory?" She asked, eyes shimmering with innocence.

Nightstar cracked a small smile and laughed. *This young cat knows nothing of the harsh world. When leafbare takes its toll, she will know.* "Of course, but hurry up."

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Nightstar padded into the camp, a wad of moss in her jaws as Mosspaw held her own. It was sunhigh and it had started to snow so the two decided a quick trip to the Glowing Moss Cave and headed home. She set down her moss and looked at her apprentice. "Go to the medicine cats and give the moss to them." She meowed. "Then, go clean out the nursery. Tell Stonepaw and Mistlepaw to help you and that I said so."

Mosspaw nodded and, with her mother's help, picked up Nightstar's moss and bounded to the medicine cat den. Nightstar watched her go and flicked her tail, seeing a few warriors in the camp. They were either reinforcing dens or waiting for patrols to come back so they could go on.

Two cats caught Nightstar's eye and she saw Dawnflame and Swiftsoul lying under a willow tree with a skinny sparrow between them. It was half-eaten and the pair were deep in conversation. She flicked her tail in annoyance and picked a scrawny mouse off the fresh-kill pile and ate it in three bites. She swiped her tongue over her jaws and began to wash her pelt.

As she reached a spot on her back, the camp entrance exploded with cats, all of which were panting and gasping for air. Nightstar saw Fennelfur and Lizardpaw at the front, eyes wide and gasping.

"Nightstar!" Meowed the apprentice, his eyes wide with fear. "H-help!"

"What happened, Lizardpaw?" Demanded the she-cat, tail lashing as many of the cats around camp came to see the commotion. "Use your words!"

Lizardpaw took a few deep breaths and looked up at his leader. "T-Twolegs have invaded the territory. They ambushed the mentors and other apprentices while we were touring the territory."

Fennelfur cut in. "They saw us and attacked at once, like badgers and dogs. They've cornered the others at the GlacierClan border but we don't know if they left."

"We have to help the others!" Called a frantic Pebblewhisker, his eyes huge. "Leaffire and the others are in danger!"

Lichenstorm and the other two deputies nodded in agreement, containing their anxiety. "Pebblewhisker's right," he glanced at Nightstar. "We have to save them."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Asked Nightstar as she raced towards the camp entrance, her deputies and warriors on her tail.

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It took what seemed like seven moons before they found their Clanmates. Nightstar was appalled at the scene she saw in front of her wide amber eyes. Twolegs were kicking, snatching, and throwing things at her Clanmates and they tried to fight back with the apprentices behind them and out of harm's way.

Nightstar hissed and threw herself at the nearest Twoleg, who had Brokenflower's scruff in their pale pink paw. She launched herself at the Twoleg's arm, sinking her teeth into the rough flesh with her claws digging in. The Twoleg let out a grunt and dropped the blue-eyed black she-cat and shook Nightstar off.

The leader arched her back and hissed as the Twoleg reached for her scruff, lashing out with a paw of unsheathed claws as a pale paw came close. The Twoleg recoiled, cursing under their breath as they glared at the Clan leader. Nightstar heard a cry of alarm and saw Stonepaw being picked up and Redstripe jumped after his apprentice.

Pain exploded in Nightstar's chest as something hard connected with her ribs and she flew back, skidding into a tree and struggled for air. Her paws clawed at her throat, gasping and wheezing for air as her vision swam and pain consumed her body. It took a while for her to be able to open her eyes and not be overwhelmed by pain. As she did, the clearing was empty and she sat up, discomfort wiggling in her chest as well as pain. *Weren't my Clanmates and Twolegs here?*

She staggered to her paws and stumbled into the forest towards her Clan. Nightstar felt strangely lighter but her chest felt heavy and she gasped for air as she pushed her way through the brambles into her camp. The first cat to notice her was Goosepaw.

"Nightstar!" He yowled and got the attention of all the cats in the Clan. Goosepaw rushed towards the she-cat, as did Lilypaw followed by her mentors.

"Where have you been?" Demanded Redstripe as he bounded towards her, eyes flashing. "It's been three *days*!"

Nightstar visibly staggered, pain sparking in her chest. "*What*?" She stared at the tom as though he had just grown another head. "But...it's been only a few moments since the Twolegs attacked."

Lichenstorm snorted. "A few moments for you since you lost a life." He meowed and Nightstar's jaw dropped. *I lost a life and it took three days?*

Shellfur pressed a paw to her chest and she hissed in pain, snapping her jaws at his paw. He pulled his paw away, shaking it. "Definitely broke some ribs, I can tell." His eyes flickered to Lilypaw, who was sniffing Nightstar's pelt. "Lilypaw, get some comfrey and line a nest with comfrey roots. Be sure to get poppy seeds, daisy leaves, and dandelion."

The she-cat nodded and sprinted back into the medicine cat's den, her tail waving frantically after her as it tried to keep up. Shellfur and Timberskip pressed on either side of Nightstar, slowly guiding the leader towards the den. The black she-cat let out a hiss and swatted them away.

"I can walk by myself!" She hissed and took a few steps before collapsing. Nightstar grunted and pushed herself painfully to her paws and nearly fell into the cave.

Shellfur steered her towards a fresh nest with roots lining it and gently laid her in it. "It's lined with comfrey root," he meowed, gesturing to the brown root with his paw. "It'll help mend and heal your broken ribs."

Nightstar simply nodded, grateful that the pain was slowly leaving her chest and allowing her to breathe with only minimal pain. She flicked her tail around herself, silently telling herself to get the apprentices to add more feathers to her nest later.

Shellfur turned his back to the leader for a moment to speak with Lilypaw, Timberskip, and Reedfrost and padded towards her with a bunch of herbs. He spread them out in front of her and nudged some suspicious flowers towards her. "It's dandelion, it'll help with the pain."

Nightstar looked warily at the short yellow flower and reluctantly lapped it up, chewing it with care before curling her lips at the gross taste. Nonetheless, she lapped up the rest of the dandelion and swallowed.

Lilypaw padded around the she-cat, wiggling some white leaves between Nightstar's joints. "Those are daisy leaves, Nightstar." The she-cat chirped. "They'll help you with...with...." She trailed off, staring at her paws in concentration.

"Your aching joints," offered Reedfrost from the back of the den where he was shuffling some herbs around.

"Exactly!" Lilypaw looked fondly over her shoulder. "Thanks, Reedfrost."

A chuckle from Nightstar's foster brother made the leader's heart warm. *I didn't realize how much I missed Reedfrost until now.* She thought with a shiver, not from the cold. *Have I really changed that much?*

Chapter Fifty-Three

Nightstar felt cold when she opened her eyes, not realizing she had fallen asleep. Beside her nest lay a vole and a wad of damp moss that was ice-cold. The leader shivered and saw snow blocking the medicine den entrance. The she-cat could barely feel her paws as she shifted in her warm nest.

"You're up rather early," commented the voice of Reedfrost as he looked over his shoulder.

"I could say the same for you," retorted Nightstar as she let out a cough. Pain lashed up her chest, making her gasp and she dug her claws into the ground.

Reedfrost turned to her, eyes flashing with interest as she wheezed. "What's it like to be the evilest cat in the Clans?" He asked mildly, surprising Nightstar.

"I'm sorry, what?" Nightstar meowed, tail tip twitching as she gazed at the medicine cat. *Is he trying to mock me?*

Reedfrost fixed her with his green gaze, making her shift uncomfortably. "You are the first cat to try to take over all four Clans while still being fairly young." He leaned towards her, eyes narrowing. "What does it feel like to take the lives of so many young, innocent cats?"

Nightstar chose to not answer as she pushed herself to her aching paws, ignoring the pain that flashed in her chest. "I'm getting out of this den." She announced and limped out of the medicine den.

The clearing was full of Nightstar's Clan as they ate their share of the prey the hunting patrols caught. Nightstar scanned the clearing and saw Swiftsoul and Dawnflame basking in the sun together, their tails twined. The leader flicked her tail and looked around, narrowing her eyes as she saw Mistlepaw, Stonepaw, Emberpaw, and Hollypaw exiting the nursery. She took a few small steps

forward until she could hear the bickering.

"I can't believe your mother made us clean the nursery." Stonepaw was groaning, shaking some moss from his blue-gray pelt. "I never want to go in there ever again."

Emberpaw let out a snort. "Just because we're four days into our apprenticeships, we're still the only apprentices other than Lilypaw and Shellfur."

Mistlepaw licked a light blue-gray paw and drew it over her ear. "Can Shellfur even be considered an apprentice still?" She wondered and Hollypaw shrugged.

"I mean, Timberskip is still alive." Hollypaw pointed out, tail flicking. "And all he does is groan about how cold it is during leafbare." She looked at her denmates, her eyes flashing.

Stonepaw let out a huff. "I won't be surprised if Timberskip doesn't last this leafbare." He meowed. "He's as old as a badger!"

Mistlepaw gasped and so did Hollypaw and Emberpaw. "Stonepaw!" She stared at her littermate in shock. "Don't say something like that about your medicine cat!"

The blue-gray tom glared at his sister. "Don't tell me that you haven't thought the same thing, Mistlepaw." He meowed and glanced at the other two apprentices. "After all, he isn't *our* medicine cat."

"What are you saying?" Emberpaw demanded, tail lashing as his claws unsheathed. He glared at the other apprentice, fur spiked. "That since he doesn't share our blood, that he isn't fit to be a medicine cat?"

Stonepaw curled his lip at Emberpaw and Nightstar tensed. "Timberskip does nothing but eat prey and waste good moss." He retorted. "Medicine cats are useless if you think about it. All they do is whine about herbs and sickness when real warriors feed and protect the Clan." His claws glinted in the sunlight and Emberpaw let out a growl. "Lilypaw was stupid to join them in that den.

Fussing over cats like a mother to her kits."

"Hold your tongue, Stonepaw." Emberpaw snarled, his voice scathing as he thrust his muzzle towards Stonepaw's.

Stonepaw sneered. "Protecting your *crush*, are you?" He taunted and smirked. "All you do is gawk at Lilypaw whenever she walks by."

Emberpaw let out a loud snarl and leaped at his denmate, who reared on his hind legs and raked his claws across Emberpaw's face. Nightstar watched on with interest while the rest of her Clan watched in shock. Hollypaw and Mistlepaw glanced worriedly at each other, frozen to the spot.

Stonepaw sank his teeth into Emberpaw's ear, making the other apprentice hiss in pain as he jerked free. The tortoiseshell tom darted at his denmate, tackling the tom and pinning the blue-gray apprentice to the ground. Together, they crashed to the ground and rolled around in a flurry of claws, fur, and teeth.

Blood splattered the blanketed ground, painting the snow a scarlet red. Mistlepaw and Hollypaw hurried after their siblings, not knowing whether to jump in, pull them apart, or let them fight.

Lichenstorm snapped out of his state of shock and let out a furious shriek. "Enough!" He hurled himself towards the two apprentices, knocking Stonepaw off Emberpaw and sending him skidding into the snow. The deputy glared at the apprentices and Nightstar limped towards him, fur prickling. "You two should know much better than *that*!" He was scolding, tail lashing.

Hollypaw and Mistlepaw shifted closer to each other, eyes glittering with worry and slight shock. Mistlepaw seemed beyond horrified and Hollypaw just seemed shocked that the two toms attacked each other.

Lichenstorm glared at Emberpaw, who was glaring at Stonepaw. "Emberpaw, just because you are the son of the Clan leader, does *not* mean you can attack your Clanmates!"

"Watch your tone, Lichenstorm," Nightstar warned, brushing past

the tom. "Do not talk to my son that way." Her voice was steady and cool, though her tone was anything but that.

The light gray tabby deputy looked furious. "You cannot shield Emberpaw from punishment, Nightstar." He growled, eyes glittering with outrage. "He must be punished no matter what."

Nightstar waved a paw dismissively, pain shooting through her chest as she did so. "Then I will decide what punishment my son will serve." She meowed and saw anger spark in Lichenstorm's gaze. "Do not forget who your leader is, Lichenstorm."

"Hardly a fit leader," a voice called out and Nightstar stiffened in anger as Timberskip shuffled through the crowd of cats.

"What was that, Timberskip?" Nightstar asked, tail flicking as her claws began to unsheathe.

The older cat glared at her and replied. "You heard me, Nightshrike." He spat her warrior name, making her tense. "You are unfit to be the leader of a Clan. Let alone three Clans at once."

"How dare you!" Hissed another voice as a bunch of cats raced forward to Nightstar's defense. She saw Robinfire at the front, eyes glittering with anger. "How dare you say that to your leader!"

"She's not our leader!" Agreed Snowmask, rising to her paws. "She took over NightClan just like she did OakClan and DawnClan!"

"Snowmask is right!" Declared another cat, one that Nightstar used to train. Goldenfire stood on the Jagged Stone, eyes glittering. "She forced me to kill Tawnywillow and she was exiled for it. She came here because she had nowhere else to go. Kill her!"

Nightstar began to panic as cats, *her* cats, surrounded her. Mosspaw, Emberpaw, and Hollypaw were in the front, eyes ablaze with hatred as they advanced towards their mother. Nightstar let out a snarl but it did nothing to stop her Clan from turning on her.

Mosspaw let out a hiss and pushed forward, making her mother back away with a warning growl. "You made our lives horrible, Nightstar." She spat, tail lashing as Nightstar's worst fear came true.

Just like in my dream when Dapplefern showed me my death. Oh, StarClan, no! "You take over our homes and say it's the will of SrarClan!"

Emberpaw and Hollypaw stepped on either side of their sister, eyes unreadable. *My precious kits, would you kill your own mother?* "Would our father go along with this, Nightstar?" Asked her son, eyes flashing with hurt. "Thorntail would never let you do this to his Clan."

The she-cat arched her back and lashed out with a paw, slashing Emberpaw's cheek. "Thorntail died before you three were *born!*" She snarled, eyes wild and crazed. "This is *my* Clan, not his!"

"He would've led it better than you could ever!" Yowled a familiar voice and Nightstar saw Lichenstorm baring his teeth. "You came here, boasting about how you ran away all those moons ago. When in reality, you killed innocent cats and got exiled!" His fur bristled and Nightstar stiffened. "You are no leader who follows StarClan!"

She backed away until her back was pressed against the wall of the nursery where her kits played less than two moons ago. "Y-you wouldn't kill your own mother, would you?" She croaked.

Mosspaw glared at her and unsheathed her claws. "You are not my mother." She meowed coldly as she advanced forward. "You are a monster." At her last word, she sprang and tackled Nightstar. The other warriors and apprentices followed in suit, snarling, and hissing. Nightstar could barely feel the pain of the claws striking her pelt and she didn't fight back. How could she? The accusations about her were true. Her eyes closed and she smiled as her Clan tore her to pieces.

Epilogue

"Then, Nightstar grasped Voletuft by the throat and bit down until the brown she-cat stopped moving." A white she-cat was meowing to two kits, eyes wide and eager. "Nightstar killed Voletuft but not before telling her to say hello to Gorsewhisper, Blackheart, and Specklewatcher."

One of the kits, a dark gray patched she-cat, gasped. "Then what happened, Iceleaf?" She asked, scooting closer to the she-cat.

The white she-cat purred with amusement and went on. "Then, moons later, she gave birth to Thorntail's kits." She paused dramatically and looked at the two kits. "Do you know who her kits are?"

The cream pointed tabby she-cat bounced up and down, squeaking. "Hollyfire, Emberburn, and Mosspelt!"

Iceleaf purred and nodded. "Very good, Meadowkit." She meowed and looked around. "Some cats say that Nightstar haunts the dreams of naughty kits who don't listen to their mother and don't tell the truth." She whispered.

Meadowkit shrieked in fear and shrank in her fur, trembling. "That's horrible!" She cried. "I promise I'll always listen to Dawnflame and I'll always tell the truth!"

"That's a lie," chuckled a soft voice from behind the two kits. "Good afternoon, Iceleaf." Meowed the black and white spotted warrior as he dipped his head. "Telling these two about Nightstar again?"

Iceleaf nodded. "It's the only story they want to hear, Swiftsoul." She let out a gentle laugh. "Alright, kits. Don't tell your mother that I told you the story again. Otherwise, I'd be picking out my own ticks!"

Meadowkit and her sister nodded in unison. "We won't!" Chirped

the cream tabby she-cat as she nudged her sister. "Come on, Hailkit. I'll race you to the nursery!"

Hailkit narrowed her sparkling eyes, excitement bubbling beneath her paws. "I bet I'll win!" She declared, racing towards her father and through his paws.

Meadowkit let out a complaint and hurled after her, nearly making Swiftsoul trip. The warrior let out a purr of amusement as they hurried to the nursery where Dawnflame was waiting. "They're a pawful sometimes." He meowed, looking over at the elder.

Iceleaf purred. "All kits are at some point," she meowed and pointed her tail at him. "You were a pawful when you were a kit."

Swiftsoul just chuckled and dropped his ears. "I've been meaning to ask you about Nightstar. Considering you knew her longer than I did."

The elder nodded. "I'm listening."

"Well," he began and laid down beside her. "I know she had kits with Thorntail, but did she ever love any other cat?"

Iceleaf was silent for a moment before she answered. "She did. In fact, she loved many cats." At Swiftsoul's surprised gaze, she went on. "She loved Lichenstar but they didn't work out. Then there was Redstripe and that was a horrible match from the start. They never had any kits together, but they hardly interacted with each other up to her death."

"Did she ever love her foster family?" Swiftsoul blurted out, unable to hold back the question.

"Yes, and she loved them very much." Iceleaf's voice dropped to a whisper. "But when she found out Blackheart was her father and Specklewatcher was her mother, she lost all love she felt for her foster family and then she became the tyrant she was."

"Do you ever feel bad for her?" As soon as he said it, he wished he could take it back. Swiftsoul let out a small sigh. "You don't have to answer that." He added in a murmur.

Iceleaf nodded, tail flicking. "Of course I did." That surprised Swiftsoul but he said nothing and nodded. "I felt sorry that she had to live in a nightmare, not knowing who her real parents were. But when she learned the truth, she took the lives of so many cats." The elder looked away, tears welling in her eyes. "But no cat is perfect. And in the end, we all die. Some more gruesome than others."